i will ever be your familiar soul

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/32995642.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Abel Gideon, Beverly Katz, Georgia Madchen
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Victorian, Dishonored AU - kind of, Alternate Universe - Magic, magical powers, dream walking, Doppelganger, Cannibalism, Hannibal Lecter is a Cannibal, Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper, Someone Help Will Graham, Suicidal Imagery, Possession, Bottom Will Graham, Top Hannibal Lecter, Surgeon Hannibal Lecter, (technically he's a general practitioner but y'know), Dark Will Graham, dream vore, dental horror, Cotard's Syndrome, Body Horror, Hand Feeding, Biting, Top Will Graham, Bottom Hannibal Lecter, Non-Consensual Drug Use, monster fucking
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-08-03 Completed: 2021-10-31 Words: 110,927 Chapters: 16/16

i will ever be your familiar soul

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Summary

“Tell me if anything is particularly sensitive.”

Will goes very still.

There’s a subtle, hair-fine moment when the human hindbrain remembers what it’s like to be prey. Hannibal has gotten good at recognizing it. But Will’s tension is a coiled thing, the imperceptible shift of muscles under skin, a push off the back foot.

He doesn’t react like prey. He reacts like a young predator before it remembers its finally grown teeth.

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Will Graham bears the mark of a heretical god, a mark said to condemn the bearer to a life of madness. Dr. Hannibal Lecter knows otherwise. When Will shuts himself away from the world, Hannibal coaxes him toward a new understanding of himself. But in the end, who is he? And what is Hannibal?

(A cowritten pseudo-Victorian/Dishonored-inspired AU.)

Notes

Currently updating once a week! Explicit in later chapters. Tags to be updated as we go.

You do not need to have played Dishonored to understand this AU! We just stole parts and ran.

Chapter 1

Will Graham hasn't left the house in a week, and he is officially out of food.

He stares at his picked-bare larder. For the moment, he's numb. More curious than anything —though why he should be surprised when he never stocked the thing properly before and he's watched his supplies dwindle every time he remembers to eat, he isn't entirely sure. In a minute, he's going to have to face the reality of going back outside, but for now, he just stares.

Wonderful, he thinks. *Could have planned this better*.

He knew, when he shut himself away, that he didn't intend to come out any time soon. Not until he'd figured out what he's going to *do* , at any rate. He doesn't want to chance running into Crawford, or Katz, or even just a local Inquisitor who takes one look at him and just...knows. Just sees it.

(He subconsciously touches the left side of his chest, where he can feel the phantom throb of *it.*)

He knew he was going to stay in, but he was too terrified to stop at the grocer's, and now he's going to have to go back out anyway.

In a little bit. Not now.

He has time. His stomach is only lightly cramping. He shuts the pantry door and retreats to the windowless dining room and its haphazard array of furniture, where he drops into the armchair he's all but lived in for the last seven days.

It hasn’t been two minutes when the thing on his chest thrums.

Snarling, Will clamps a hand hard against his chest—then freezes, because it hasn’t hurt, or felt like anything at all, since—

Well. Since he shut himself away, at any rate.

And then he hears the knocking.

Warily, he glances toward the hall leading to the front door. The knock was quiet enough. He could ignore it. The townhouse, while narrow, is shabby—nobody would expect there to be a doorman (which is good, because there isn’t). He could pretend to be not home.

Or he could use this as his excuse to get out. Apologize to whoever it is, say he’s just leaving. That could work. It’s probably somebody from Crawford’s office anyway, just looking for a sign of life; if it were Crawford himself, his door would still be shaking in its lintel.

He's all the way to the door before he realizes he's in no way dressed to go out. He's almost decent—the trousers are clean, his shirt isn't too wrinkled, he even has a waistcoat on, and shoes—but his jacket is nowhere nearby.

Option three, then, since if his unwanted visitor is persistent at all, they're likely still at the door and have heard his approach. So he flips the mail slot open just long enough to snap, "Not currently accepting visitors."

And then he retreats, prepared to hide, because the tingling sensation against his chest isn't going away.

It's getting stronger.

But he's still looking when the mail flap lifts, this time pushed up by a long metal instrument that Will can't fully make out from this angle. He blinks at it, stunned.

"I can see that from the state of your stoop," the man says, as if this is an entirely normal way to conduct a conversation. "You hardly open the door for the milkman, let alone anyone you may actually invite inside."

That is *not* a voice he knows.

Walk away, Graham, he tells himself. *Wait him out.* It's too dangerous otherwise. For all he knows, the man on his doorstep is an Inquisitor. Though—he doesn't sound like one; they don't recruit a lot of foreigners, for one, and they'd be more prone to banging down the door than quipping about the milkman.

Carefully, Will edges toward the door. "And you don't have an invitation," he says, finally. "Please leave. And if Jack Crawford sent you, tell him—"

What? Either he gets this under control and can go back, or he needs to disappear. And he has no hope of getting this under control without being around people again, but that's also how he might get caught.

His headache, seemingly always present these days, intensifies. He shuts his eyes, scrubs at them. "Tell him I'm sick."

"I am merely doing Jack Crawford a favor," the visitor says, patient without being patronizing. Somehow that's worse. "And I would apologize for the ambush, but I find apologizing often quickly turns from sincere to tiresome. Far be it from me to further put myself between you and Jack, but it hardly takes a physician to notice that you do sound unwell."

"And are you? A physician, that is," Will says before he can stop himself, then grimaces. This is ridiculous. If he's going to talk to this man, the door isn't really going to help him. This new affliction of his, the power that lives just above his heart, can work just on the amount of information he can glean from diction and cadence, or at least Will thinks it can.

So either it will happen or it won't. And though the brand on his chest still tingles, the sensation is getting fainter, and there's no sign of a shadowy form in his hallway.

Better to be a normal human being, then, for the sake of the report this man will take back to Crawford.

Never once in Dr. Hannibal Lecter's long career of home visits has he ever talked to anyone through a mail slot.

Then again, his rounds never take him to the water districts and their damp streets crowded with lime-white buildings with clay-tiled roofs— *a pity; the scrabble of life here is raw and honest and unashamed; it catches his eye.* If not for Jack Crawford catching him on the tail end of his wife's weekly appointment, he wouldn't be here at all.

I'm afraid I rarely take on new patients, he'd told him, courteous but firm.

Oh, I wouldn't presume to send you a new patient, Dr. Lecter, Jack had responded, quick and sharp-eyed. He'd handed Hannibal a slip of paper with *Will Graham, 1327-B St. Mary's Road* scrawled on it. *I just need someone who isn't me to make sure he's still alive.*

Which is how Hannibal has found himself standing on the stoop of a narrow rowhouse with a set of extractors keeping the mail slot wedged firmly open— *the thermometer is the longest implement of the kit and acclimated to being slid into orifices, but he would rather not sterilize it again*. He's about to peer through the slot to put a face to the gently-strained voice coming from the other side— *legs, more likely than a face, or groin, which would make for a graceless, if memorable, introduction* —when the door opens.

Will Graham looks more disheveled than strictly unwell, squinting against the watery sunlight in rumpled shirtsleeves and a week's growth of beard. Even so, his face is startlingly lovely, his frown finely-sculpted. The eyes that slip quickly away from Hannibal's are a captivating blue— *he would pick Turnbull's blue to memorialize them on canvas, though he doesn't paint.*

He's certainly alive. Jack's curiosity peaked and sated.

Under the fold of Hannibal's cravat— *perhaps out of fashion by several years but classic and, most importantly, well-suited to his purposes* —the Mark in the hollow of his throat prickles cold, a thing like a whisper. Pointed. And curious.

Hannibal offers him a polite smile.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Graham, and yes, I am." He flicks his gaze just over Will's shoulders— *as if the state of his health will be reflected in the condition of his foyer*. "May I come in?"

"Pretty sure you can get everything Crawford needs from right there," Will says, gaze darting over Hannibal.

That gaze catches on Hannibal's cravat and narrows— *an interesting stone to throw coming from an unshaven man in his shirtsleeves and a waistcoat in desperate need of pressing*. He still doesn't meet Hannibal's eyes as he bends past him to get the milk.

"You could at least start with your name," Will mutters as he straightens up again. "Wouldn't want to be *rude*, now would we?"

"I don't make a habit of rudeness, no, but I'm only human." Hannibal slips a hand past him to tug the extractors out of the mail slot. "And as a physician, I rarely find myself turned away."

When he pulls back, Will is looking at him, finally. Hannibal's polite smile softens, unbidden, lips parting just a fraction with something more genuine.

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter," he recovers smoothly. Instead of holding out a hand— *one of the few civilities he doesn't hold in high regard and, all the same, Will Graham doesn't seem like a man particularly fettered by the social contract* —Hannibal slips the extractors back into the bag and holds up the thermometer. "And, yes, I could get everything I need right here in the doorway, but shouldn't one have some consideration for the neighbors?"

Will eyes the thermometer with distaste and briefly looks like he's considering slamming the door in Hannibal's face. Instead, he sighs and steps back into the entrance hall.

"If it will set Crawford's weary soul at ease, then we'd better get it over with," he says. "But my illness isn't physical."

Hannibal replaces the thermometer back in the bag and steps inside. He is utterly unconcerned about Jack Crawford's weary soul or his restful sleep— *he keeps the investigator in the dark on a great many things; truths and lies are as malleable as anything else* . All of his attention is turned to the man in front of him, who has a delicate downturned curve of a mouth and draws the attention of his Mark.

"The mind can affect the body as much as the body can affect the mind," Hannibal notes. "Even mental illnesses can present with distinct physical symptoms."

Will doesn't look at him, but Hannibal watches the edges of his face— *worn line between the brows, the tight point where jaw meets skull, the corners of lips and those shocking blue eyes* —as he chews on Hannibal's words and clearly finds them wanting.

"Where would you like me, Mr. Graham?"

He grimaces but waggles the milk delivery. "Kitchen."

The kitchen is at the end of a long hallway that runs the length of the townhouse, looking out onto a simple but maintained garden. Clean but simple, with no icebox and only a basic cooking range. Murky sunlight spills in through two large windows. Will sets the milk on one of the counters, then gestures to the small prep table nearby, where two chairs are tucked into it.

"Will this work?" he asks.

Hannibal dips his head in a short nod. “It will.”

Short of the few babies he delivered during his training, he hasn’t practiced medicine in a kitchen in some time— *his carefully-curated kitchen is a wonder of aesthetic function, which isn’t to say that bodily fluids don’t routinely find their way to his counters*. The whole place smells of dust, mostly, old cooking oil, and the stale air of rooms that have gone too long with the windows shut. From this far away, he can’t smell anything on Will other than the assaulting bite of an aftershave— *too heavy on musk and amber* —that Hannibal can already feel threatening to give him a headache.

He sets his bag on the prep table and lets his eyes wander over Will. Nothing unusual on his hands, wrists, the exposed pale line of his throat.

“I find that patients frequently have the best understanding of the specific nature of their symptoms and the experience of their own bodies,” says Hannibal, folding his hands on top of the bag. “Any chief complaints?”

The mark of a heretical god that appeared on my chest a week and a half ago and ruined my life.

Will doesn’t say that, of course. Instead, he mutters, “A revolutionary physician, to actually listen to your patients,” then grimaces and rubs at the back of his neck.

The best lies are mostly truth, so eventually he continues, with the air of a confession, “Headaches. Frequently. And my sleep is poorer than usual, which was quite poor already.” His gaze flicks over Lecter’s hands, resting on the bag, noting his clean nails. “All a side effect of my work for Jack Crawford, of course. Not much to be done about that. I’ve tried a few tonics—all either worthless or too incapacitating.”

“Medication is not the cure to all ills,” Lecter murmurs, considering Will so closely that Will has to fight the urge to flee. “And what is it you do for Jack?”

“I’m surprised he didn’t tell you before sending you over. I am possessed of a particular talent for getting into the minds of his killers.”

Maybe more literally, now.

“Perhaps Uncle Jack wanted an opinion unclouded by expectations,” Lecter replies, then crosses the expanse of floor between them. Lecter keeps his hands where Will can see them, like Will’s a spooked animal, which he has to concede is appropriate. It even almost works.

“I’m going to have to touch you.”

Will doesn’t stop the little snarl that twists his upper lip momentarily, but he does nod, carefully averting his gaze from the other man. Easier to bear this if he doesn’t have to watch what the physician thinks about him (even if keeping an eye on him would be the safer move). Will does still cross his arms over his chest—but he doesn’t retreat.

“You have a knack for the monsters, then.” Lecter’s voice is closer and that’s the only warning Will gets before his broad hand is resting on Will’s left shoulder. It should be neutral territory.

But just a few inches lower, below his shirt, the *thing* there doesn’t just hum; it *burns* .

The sensation is sharp and undeniably powerful, far stronger than anything he’s felt since he hid himself away, and it makes his breath hitch. It’s only great force of will that keeps him from snarling and wrenching the physician’s hand away. He can’t let on, but he also can’t entirely mask his reaction.

He flinches. Lecter notices.

“This may be easier if you close your eyes,” he murmurs.

“Just get it over with,” Will snaps, fingers clawing into his forearms where they’re still crossed over his chest, even tighter now. It’s the only way he can keep himself still.

He has no idea what’s causing it, if it’s pure response to touch or to the ramping up of his anxiety.

But he knows it’s dangerous.

It’s the tightening of Will’s expression that makes Hannibal move .

He reaches up and braces his thumbs at the base of Will’s skull, and the moment they brush past the sweat-damp curls there— *just as soft as he imagined* —he knows. The brand between his collarbones flushes with a searing heat in response, the way pain knows pain and predators recognize each other by scent alone. Like recognizing like.

Will Graham is Marked.

— the Marked are few and far between; most attempt to hide it, until they can’t; some kill themselves before the Inquisitors can, before the madness they so fear starts to become a self-fulfilling prophecy —

Hannibal feels snared, hooked. Fascinated.

He presses down, just enough, then moves incrementally forward and reapplies the pressure. Hannibal makes his way behind Will’s ears, up to his temples, at the edges of his hairline. Professional, clinical, but inside, he burns.

“Tell me if anything is particularly sensitive.”

Will goes very still.

There’s a subtle, hair-fine moment when the human hindbrain remembers what it’s like to be prey. Hannibal has gotten good at recognizing it. But Will’s tension is a coiled thing, the imperceptible shift of muscles under skin, a push off the back foot.

He doesn’t react like prey. He reacts like a young predator before it remembers its finally grown teeth.

— honest and raw; beautiful, in its own right —

In that moment, there is nothing Hannibal wants less than to let go of Will Graham.

Finally, Will says, “It doesn’t respond to pressure. It’s—deeper than that. Constant.”

This close— *no sense in hiding it now, he’ll know* —Hannibal barely has to inhale for the sweet, clean scent of the Mark to flood his senses, sharp as hot metal. It’s somewhere under his shirt, if he had to take an educated guess. He resists smoothing a thatch of stray curls off Will’s forehead when he finally pulls away.

“That suggests the cause is likely psychosomatic. I imagine stepping into the minds of killers takes its toll. As does Jack Crawford’s persistence,” Hannibal replies, returning to his bag and retrieving his stethoscope.

Will does not respond, instead asking, incredulously, "Did you just *smell* me?"

— no sense in lying; he rarely sees the use of outright dishonestly —

“I did. Remove your shirt, if you would.”

"No, absolutely not. I didn't ask for your help, and I don't see the need,” Will says. He leaves the counter, pacing over to the windows. He never turns his back fully on Hannibal, even as he glances outside, the lines of his body tight and untrusting. "Just—let Crawford know he really does need to back off for another week or two. I'm sure you have actual paying patients waiting."

Hannibal watches him pace. “I plan on informing Jack that you are ill enough to mandate no less than ten days of isolation and bedrest. Our conversation for him stopped when I crossed your threshold. Consider anything I do now free of obligation, financial or otherwise. Stress does unusual things to the body. The need, as you put it, is for someone who understands those symptoms to diagnose and manage them before they can do permanent damage.”

"There's nothing wrong with my chest," Will says.

— it almost sounds like a slip, a specification he never made —

Hannibal doesn’t quite manage to keep from smiling. A small thing, just a quirk.

— it could mean nothing; could, but likely doesn’t, with the way Will holds himself like he has something to hide —

“Nothing *wrong*, perhaps, but something there is drawing your attention. I imagine you’re used to deflecting, convincing yourself you don’t strictly need anything, help or otherwise.”

"I appreciate your ensuring my privacy.” Will’s hands twitch at his side before he runs one restlessly through his hair. "And I appreciate your charitable expertise. But I don't need

anything else."

Hannibal sets the stethoscope back on the table and says, “My confidentiality policy extends beyond Jack Crawford. Here in this examination, your concerns are my concerns, your interests mine. And I always protect my interests, Mr. Graham.”

He watches Will pace the rest of the room, irritated and thoroughly impolite, as if searching for somewhere to run or something else to fling into the path of his relentless insistence. He isn’t, however, showing Hannibal promptly to the door or threatening him, as some are wont to do when backed into a corner.

No, he looks rather like he wants to round on Hannibal and ask *why*.

— it seems Will is going to give in, not out of some misplaced sense of politeness or even deference to Jack Crawford, but because some part of him is curious, no matter how small it may be —

Will stops in the doorway, his back to Hannibal, when he finally speaks again.

“Fine.” His voice sounds rusty, though he’s only been quiet for a minute at most. “In here, though, if you would.”

Will disappears into the hall. A slow thrill of heat threads through Hannibal. It isn’t from the Mark.

— he doesn’t know what happens now —

Hannibal finds Will in the dining room. Or what is supposed to be a dining room, as he soon discovers when he twists the knob to bring the lights up. It’s filled with furniture that can only be described as *various*. There’s even a piano tucked away in a dusty corner.

There are no windows.

Will stands near a desk, half-turned away from him as he shrugs out of his waistcoat and starts on his rumpled shirt. He has strong workman’s hands and calluses on some of his fingers— *the hands of someone who hasn’t always hunted killers for Jack Crawford.*

Hannibal rubs his thumb down his pointer finger, once, twice.

“Thank you," he says.

Will’s gaze flickers restlessly between him and the doorway for a moment before sliding slowly and purposefully to his face. Hannibal relishes Will’s full attention, the gravity of it, the way it seeks to flay him open.

He can almost hear it reverberating through his skull: *I see you, I see you, I see you*.

He knows Will doesn’t, not fully— *in for a penny* —not yet. But he will.

Will slides the last few buttons open and shrugs out of his shirt. He doesn’t look away.

And there, on his chest, is exactly what Hannibal is looking for: the intricate pattern of black, sharper and cleaner than any tattoo, pulsing with a faint but unearthly orange light.

— in for a pound —

Hannibal hasn't had occasion to see many besides his own, only two on the living— *he drowned their Marks in blackish streams of arterial blood* —and a handful on the dead. He feels a dull second pulse in the hollow of his neck, still hidden beneath layers of cravat and collar, answering the ripple of light through Will's Mark. The air shifts, barely perceptible, like the moment before a lightning strike.

The sheer danger of this moment perfuses through him with every slow squeeze of his heart. He could reach for his strength, his speed, the Mark clawing at him to use it.

He doesn't.

Hannibal says, calm but firm, "*Will*."

"How far does your confidentiality extend now, Dr. Lecter?" Will asks, and it's almost a drawl.

It's that or falter, fall apart from how the physician has just dropped formality between them while Will is already so vulnerable. There's no fear in Lecter's eyes or stance. No, it's that same interest he's been showing since he cradled Will's head in the kitchen, that excitement, that… *hunger*.

He wonders what he'd see, if he let the heretical power loose, let it build a shadow copy of him patterned off of Lecter. It's remarkably hard to get a read on him. Will thought it was just his own refusal to look, but no, the man is locked down. Entirely under his own control.

Dangerous.

If he has to defend himself, he'll pull on the memory of Tobias Budge, because that killer knew how to fight for his life. Will only hopes, desperately, that it can work on command as well as it worked in panic. That maybe he won't need it at all.

"It extends as far as is needed," Lecter replies mildly. There's no trace of anxiety in him. If anything, there is only a careful stillness. His analyzing, piercing gaze never lets up. "Does your Mark wish to kill me?"

Will's lips twist in a bitter little smile. "It's not that simple. It doesn't—communicate."

"Of course it does. Communication is as much about being understood as it is learning what to listen for."

This is wrong. This is not how a physician should react to the heretical emblem branded into Will's flesh by an unknown hand. He doesn't move for the knife yet. He does, however, let the buzzing of the Mark into his head a little bit more. He's only done this accidentally, too afraid to test it even in the privacy of his empty townhouse. But he knows what it feels like.

It feels like how he's always slipped into the minds of Jack Crawford's monsters, except made physical.

He doesn't go far enough that anything takes form, but the air feels heavier. Cold and cloying. Still, Will has enough desperate hope for one last question.

"Do you know of any way to remove it, doctor? I can assure you, I never asked for this."

Lecter stills, even as his hand has edged towards a pocket.

"I imagine you never asked to understand Jack's killers, either," he says. "The Mark is you as much as your knack for the monsters. If there's a way to remove it, I don't know it."

Will can feel himself beginning to tremble. Lecter's responses continue to make no sense. "Careful," he murmurs, not sure if he wants to laugh or scream. "That's almost heretical." Almost, but not quite. The Inquisitors are of the opinion that the Mark makes one evil, but most also hold that, on the reverse, only those prone to evil ever receive the Mark.

Still, to even imagine such a state implies a certain level of familiarity, more than a physician should have, and that, combined with the delight he's sure he's reading off of Lecter, makes one thing suddenly, viscerally clear:

He's not natural, either.

Something in him, specifically, is what is calling to his Mark, and there's only one very good possibility for that. Which means, regardless of if the Inquisitors are right or not, he can't, *shouldn't*, assume he's safe here. And it's not betrayal he needs to fear.

Before he can second guess himself, Will grabs his knife and lunges forward. Behind Lecter, shadows coalesce into the mirror image of Will.

Soundless, featureless, it loops a garrote around Lecter's throat.

And Lecter, like a prizefighter more than a doctor, drops to his knees in a fluid, forceful motion. The wire skirts the underside of his chin as he wrenches away from it and throws an elbow back to knock at the shadow. At his touch, the shadows vanish, and it is only them again.

That isn't supposed to happen, but Will doesn't have time to think, because

Lecter is on his feet again in time to grab Will's arm, to smash down with his other hand and knock the knife loose. The blade clatters to the floor and Will snarls in frustration and pain.

He needs to open up space between them again. Or he needs to win *now*.

His shadow selves take on perfect replicas of the violent natures of the killers he lets into his mind, but he's absorbed those natures, too, if imperfectly.

Will's knuckles crack against Lecter's jaw.

His neck snaps sideways, but he keeps his grip tight to Will's wrist. It's hard, too hard for any man, and he's too fast to track as he gets a hold of Will's other arm, wrenching it behind his back.

It's that speed that confirms what Will was already fairly sure of, but even half-anticipating it, he isn't able to sidestep or break free. He bares his teeth as his arm lights up in pain, as he's tangled up in the physician's grasp. It hurts. It fucking *hurts*.

And it also feels like ecstasy, no longer fighting the buzzing darkness in his chest.

(The Mark sings at the physical contact between them. Is it *supposed* to do that?)

Will races through options but not fast enough to be useful; having a killer to pattern himself after doesn't work when it gets into the realm of reaction. So he does the only thing that he can really think of.

He drops his weight down the floor, hoping to force Lecter to disengage or come down with him, hoping it doesn't end up breaking his arm.

It doesn't, but Lecter also doesn't let go.

Lecter absorbs the hit with one shoulder, sparing Will, but before he can make sense of it, Lecter shoves off the floor and settles just enough of his weight on Will to pin him to the ground. There's a moment when he could break free; could get to the knife, or out the door, because in a race through his own house, he stands a fair chance at winning. But he can't think. The interplay of his Mark and Lecter atop him (and the reality that he's barely eaten all day and hasn't been sleeping well for weeks) outweighs the surging adrenaline for just long enough that Lecter can steady himself. The knife is close by, but Will can't reach it, and Lecter spots it too. He kicks it into a dusty corner of the room.

He leans down, close to Will's ear and huffs, "I have no interest in killing you."

"Never said you did," Will gasps, still trying to recover his breath.

He's trapped, body singing with adrenaline and the heady flush of the Mark.

"You didn't have to," Hannibal tells him.

He needs to buy time, catch his breath, come up with a *real* plan. And figure out exactly what he's afraid of right now, because he's telling the truth—he doesn't think Lecter means to kill him.

But hurt? Put him in danger somehow? Oh, yes. His instincts aren't often wrong on that front. This man is predatory. He should have seen it sooner.

"You knew," Will pants, trying to feel out the exact shape of the danger. "How did you know?"

"I'm trained to observe a great many things. I can't simply shut it off."

He nearly snaps, *And how long have you been Marked for?* but he knows he won't get a straight answer. If this were brotherly concern for another in the same dire straits, Lecter would have led with that.

No, he's going to have to drag it into the open less verbally, more physically.

Will hesitates a moment, then closes his eyes, focusing in. Focusing on the thing he's been trying so desperately to ignore: the throbbing of his Mark, its nature and its flavor.

And then he goes a little farther, curious to see if he can follow back the reactive excitement of it to the trigger.

Throat. It's intuition, just like the majority of how he reads people, and then he remembers the cravat, and things click into place.

"And what else have you observed?" he asks, opening his eyes once more. He's trapped on his belly, but Lecter only has one hand caught. The other is pinned between Will and the floor. He can use that.

And he can try another shadow form. He's flagging, and it won't last long, but it might last long enough. He dredges up the mind of a serial strangler. Similar to Tobias Budge, but not so brash. Stealthier. He doesn't move, doesn't acknowledge the shadows forming behind them both.

This time, Lecter doesn't notice until it's too late.

Fingers, curling with black smoke, grab Lecter's neck and *squeeze.* He chokes as the shadow hands wrench him sideways, enough to unseat him and yank his grip off Will's trapped arm. Lecter manages a strike that sends the shadows dissolving once more, but he's not fast enough.

Because as exhausted as Will is, he's also more predator than prey. He doesn't falter. He is up and turned over and bearing down on top of Lecter faster than he can think, one hand and his body weight forcing the other man against the floor, the other following the path of his double's hands —instead of seizing Lecter's throat, he grabs the cravat.

There's no time to untie it, but he can grip the front length of it and pull up and to the side, baring a slash of Lecter's throat, possibly choking off his air at the same time.

Beneath him, Lecter looks up defiantly.

No—not defiantly. *Proudly*. Hungrily.

Do it, his expression says. *Look.*

He wants this.

Don't look, some part of Will hisses, but he's never been good at closing his eyes, at ignoring. The hand in Lecter's cravat holds tension, a leash, while his other hand slides up Lecter's chest, gentler now. His fingers undo his collar, hook into the fabric, pull down.

And there, at the hollow of his throat, in sharp black pigment, is the exact same Mark that is emblazoned on Will's heaving, naked chest.

The tension in his body changes, then. Grows heavier with some manner of release. He's straddling the physician's waist, and it's all so unbearably intimate now, with the confirmation that they are alike.

That they can see each other.

Slowly, Will tears his gaze from the Mark, and meets Lecter's eyes once more. His heart is loud in his ears. He doesn't understand; he attacked because he suspected. So now that it's been confirmed, why has the fight gone out of him?

"What do you want from me?" Will whispers.

Lecter may be pinned under him, but he doesn't look it. He looks like he's won.

He smiles.

"A conversation."

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> *"If you think you can hide from this, you're looking in the wrong corner. Right or wrong, you are not the same man as the one who walked through the minds of killers before the Mark, just as who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today. This—"*
>
> *He reaches up and presses a finger against his collar, beneath which his Mark lurks.*
>
> *"—is the point that marks past from future. It is change. Don't you crave change, Will?"*
>
> *Will glares at him.*
>
> --
>
> Will and Hannibal compare notes on what it means to be Marked.

Hannibal expects to be allowed to get to his feet but Will makes no move to get off of him.

Will still has fingers around his cravat, drawn tight enough to dig into his neck but not enough to cut off his air completely. Hannibal doesn't even try to shift any weight off him in the slightest— *he's enjoying the attention, the unreadable expression on Will's face that tiptoes around both frustration and awe*.

Perhaps they're going to have this conversation on the floor.

He wouldn't mind. Will stares intently at his Mark, throat bobbing as he swallows.

"You can tell me about—this?" he asks. His fingers brush the brand in the hollow of Hannibal's throat, feather-light and filament-hot. Hannibal feels the touch all the way down to his bones. "More than platitudes?"

Hannibal notes the way Will shudders. He wonders if he can ever make him do it again.

"I can. As much as I am able," he says simply, voice rough and Adam's apple barely moving under the fabric still bearing down against it. "May I call you Will?"

Will looks just short of snapping *no* but all that comes out is, "Let's keep it professional."

Hannibal tries not to smile— *he and Will Graham have passed professional long ago, but he's hardly bothered by it.* Will drops the cravat as if burned and rolls back on his heels to

stand. He hesitates — *searches Will's face for some kind of remorse or discomfort but he doesn't find anything; Will Graham can school his face after all* —then reaches out a hand.

— *apology or simple courtesy, only the fact that it's offered truly matters* —

Hannibal takes it.

When he gets to his feet, he moves a hand to his throat— *to straighten the wrecked collar, to fix the wrenched cravat, to test the extent of the damage, to run his fingers over the bruising skin like a prayer.* Hannibal settles for rebuttoning the collar. He slips the cravat off, folds it, and tucks it into a pocket. He smooths the front of his shirt, his coat, and sends a surreptitious glance at Will who is redressing quickly and a bit haphazardly — *really, he'd prefer Will's shirt stayed off and those top buttons unbuttoned, but that is a thought to be entertained at a later date.*

He doesn't miss the little glances Will keeps throwing at him, the way his gaze finds its way back to his collar.

"I think some tea would be appropriate," Hannibal says. "Or coffee, if you have it."

"That's about all I have on hand," Will mutters, then, after a moment's hesitation, turns his back on Hannibal and heads out into the hall.

— *Will almost didn't turn his back; not completely relaxed then; smart* —

Back in the kitchen, Hannibal takes his time to look around while Will sets to putting on a kettle. There's little here, save the still-sweating milk. There doesn't even seem to be an icebox. He catches a glimpse of the nearly bare cupboards when Will stares, frowning, into one.

Lightly, Hannibal asks, "Been avoiding Jack Crawford that long?"

"About a week," he answers. "Maybe a little longer."

Hannibal quietly laments the thought of what exactly Will has been eating, given the state of his cupboards. Will leans back against the counter, bracing his hands on the edge and drops his gaze to the floor. It seems more that Will *won't* look at him rather than *can't* .

"The Mark appeared sixteen days ago, after a nightmare. I didn't tell anybody. I intended to ignore it, but—" Will breaks off. He doesn't look up. "After the first time one of my—" he hesitates, as if considering his words "— *doubles* appeared, I stopped going outside. It's not…safe."

Hannibal inclines his head at *doubles* , thinking back to the soot-black fingers that had closed around his throat and the flickers of dark smoke that he'd caught glimpses of during their fight. So those were Will. Or copies of him, shadows peeled away from their owner.

"It's important to feel safe, but not necessarily to the extent of total isolation and deprivation. An extent you appear to be rapidly approaching," Hannibal says. He settles in on the other

side of the counter. Keeps distance between them. Just enough. “This nightmare, what do you remember about it?”

Will makes a sound that might be a laugh.

"Too much," he mutters, jaw tensing for a moment. He rolls his head back and takes up looking at the ceiling, instead. "It wasn't even one of the bad ones. There was—a black stag, except instead of hair, its skin was covered in feathers. Like crow feathers, or a raven’s. I'd dreamed of it a few times before. I was always...following it somewhere. I could never reach it. But this time, I couldn't see it at all. I was walking down a road, until I met the sea, and then I felt its breath on my arm. It had followed me all the way there, and I hadn't noticed. I turned, and it backed away.”

Hannibal lets himself imagine it— *glossed plumage, oil-black and opalescent with blues and greens and purples.* He slips the image and all its dark splendor into a corner of his mind, a place to be revisited. His Mark hums at the thought of it. If Hannibal closed his eyes, he could almost feel the prick of tines against his skull, shifting under his scalp. Antlers of his own.

He keeps his eyes open instead, following the path of Will’s hand as he brings it up to touch his chest right over his Mark.

"And then it charged. Impaled me on its antlers. The biggest prong pierced right here. It hurt. It felt like I was being...pitted. Hollowed out, like it was making room for something *else* . When I woke up, the Mark was there. And I was standing on a pier down at the docks, in my nightclothes."

Hannibal adds that to his mental rendering: a nightmare stag and the man in front of him speared through with dozens of pale, curved tines.

— onset of sleepwalking in adulthood is less common than in children, possible preternatural explanation notwithstanding; all in all, curious —

“Dreams are often the only place where we can feel safe and relinquish physical control. That’s why it came for you there. In a way, it was making room, but not for something else,” Hannibal says. He takes in the sleepless circles under Will’s eyes, the weight of exhaustion that settles heavily in the tight line of his mouth. “Tell me, Mr. Graham, do you still wake up in places far from where you fell asleep?”

Mr. Graham feels far too cold, which is ridiculous, because he *asked* for this. He turns away as the kettle whistles, reaching for his tin of tea leaves. He personally prefers coffee, but it's more expensive, and more difficult to keep and prepare. Just one of the many things he's lost by hiding away from Crawford—coffee that just appears, already brewed.

"I don't particularly feel *safe* in my dreams, Dr. Lecter,” he says, voice tinged with bitter humor as he fills the teapot. “Like I said, that was one of the more benign ones, excepting the end. Mostly they're much... bloodier."

He adds milk to his cup before the tea is even finished steeping, but doesn't take the liberty of adding any to Lecter's (though he does consider it). Instead, in two short trips, he brings cups, milk, and teapot over to the scarred table, and sits down heavily. "As for the sleepwalking, two mornings ago, I woke up on the roof. I've gotten better at locking the doors, but that doesn't always help."

And occasionally, he could swear that he dreams other people's dreams—but that's likely just his newly-enhanced paranoia talking.

He wishes he had sugar. He wishes Lecter would be less congenial about all of this, lack of sugar included.

"You're really willing to just...move on from me attacking you?" he asks.

“I was a threat and you followed an instinct to protect yourself,” Lecter answers. “I don’t take that personally.” He takes the other seat at the table and the offered tea. No milk.

“I imagine what you see and learn with Jack touches everything in your mind,” he says as he sits back, to all appearances comfortable. “No safety in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.”

"It's always *touched everything*," Will agrees. "But it's worth it. I'm good at what I do. Thinking like killers accurately enough to catch them." *Hunting monsters*. "They just...don't always leave once I've invited them in. It was a problem even before the Mark."

He sips his tea; it's barely cool enough to drink, even with the milk. His stomach cramps at the first touch of liquid, of *calories* , all day, but he ignores it admirably.

"It's worse now. The doubles pattern themselves off of every killer I've ever shared headspace with. At first, I couldn't control it at all. Any time I felt frightened, scared, I'd see one begin to manifest, and…that's a little hard to hide."

“Even more important, then, to find a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there, should you return to work for him.” Lecter pauses. “You said *at first*. And now?”

He can't stop from smirking, so he takes another sip of tea. "They listened to me well enough in the other room."

“Did they?” Lecter says, but it doesn’t sound like a real question. He sounds pleased. “Tell me about the first double.”

Will abruptly wishes his tea was something stronger. He doesn’t want to have this conversation sober. He starts talking anyway.

“There was a case a few months back—the Shrike, the newspapers called him. He killed young women who looked like his daughter. Ate them. When I—when we found him, he cut his daughter’s throat rather than let us separate them. I separated them. The girl, Abigail, survived.” He manages to relate that much dispassionately, and then he breaks. He scrubs at his beard. “I visited her, in the convalescent home. She hasn’t woken up, and I visited her

every week until a fortnight ago. I'd been having nightmares of killing her, just like her father tried to. I knew *exactly* what it would feel like, and I hated myself for it. And that knowledge and that guilt combined with the Mark, I suppose, and it made a double of me with all the Shrike's longing. It tried to cut her throat."

His grip on the teacup is too tight. He puts it down. Pushes against the rough wood of the table to ground himself.

"I ran. Nobody's told me that Abigail is dead, so I can only assume the Shrike left with me. I stopped visiting. Tried to ignore it, get on with my life, but sometimes I'd wake from nightmares, and I wouldn't be alone. Or I'd feel one starting to coalesce when Crawford pushed me too hard. I don't think he ever noticed anything, I would numb myself to the anger as quickly as I could, then leave. And it worked. But..."

Lecter watches him very closely. "That doesn't mean it always will."

Will nods. "My work *requires* me to overwhelm myself. To lose myself in dark places. Maybe if I worked for somebody less perceptive than Jack Crawford, I could manage, but the risk is too great. And then there are the Inquisitors that partner with Crawford's team with some regularity."

"If you feel your work with Jack is important enough to continue," Lecter says smoothly, "then your goal must be to find better ways to cope when overwhelmed; you can't shut this out. Consider working with the Mark instead of against it."

"There's nothing to work with. These things don't speak, they're violent by nature, they can't be reasoned with. Today proved that I can create them with some intentionality, and maybe, *maybe* control them. But I don't know what would have happened if you couldn't—banish them. When I decided to stop, maybe they wouldn't have."

"Their physical reality terrifies you," Lecter reasons. "You may hunt and subdue a killer, and you may separate yourself from their desires even as you assume their point of view. But your doubles present a living version of your nightmares, where you not only have the ability to hurt others, but the will to do it as well."

Will grimaces as Lecter cuts straight into the weakest part of himself. He has always feared becoming that which he hunts. He knows the line is permeable for anybody, and even more so for him.

The doubles dance across that line with abandon.

"I just thought," Will says, "when the day came, it would be my own hand holding the knife, and that I could cut it off with the other."

At that, Hannibal watches Will Graham closely. He allows himself the pleasure of imagining that fateful day, the tangle of desires and horror that might overwhelm Will as he brought a knife down through flesh, blood, bone and out the other side again. To feel that thicket of

desires as his own, that exquisite flare of pain— *would Will think it necessary? would Will cry out even as he suffers at his own hand?*

He doesn't know. He can't even begin to guess.

Hannibal has to suppress a smile—*and a not insignificant curl of pleasure*.

"There's time for that yet," he says, then sits back and folds his hands— *given time, he wonders what else dredging the murky depths of Will Graham's unpredictability would allow to rise to the surface* . "You said you separated the Shrike from his daughter. Did you kill him, Mr. Graham?"

"Yes. Because my work demanded it," Will answers, voice clipped but not with any kind of shame. It almost sounds like impatience.

— interesting —

"And that doesn't count as causing harm by your own hand?"

Will finally looks up and says, a note of irritation in his voice, "It's different. The Shrike wasn't my...my victim."

Hannibal blinks. "If he's not a victim, then what do you consider him?"

Will considers for a moment, then shrugs, a smile flickering over his tense features. "Dead." He lets the word hang briefly, then fires back, "Quid pro quo. Have *you* taken a life?"

"I've been a practicing physician for many years. There've been many patients I couldn't save, which feels like killing them," Hannibal answers— *and it isn't a lie; there is fault in failing no matter the power you hold, in the transitive property of guilt by circumstance.* "Every time."

The smile vanishes as Will's fingers tighten on the counter, then relax again. "I find that I'm curious, doctor, as to how *your* Mark manifests. Clearly it's not in doubles of yourself."

"I can inhabit the bodies of others. Perhaps in some way, I imagine, similar to what your gift allows you to do to the mind." Hannibal returns a smile, a thin thing. "Though, of course, the line between body and mind is hardly clear-cut."

Will's gaze turns wary. He knows he earns Will's sharp return to the defensive— *and tries not to mourn the disappearance of the smile* —by keeping his answers perfectly vague. Will works with investigators. By now, he's likely reasoned that no amount of hammering at the hard shell that is Hannibal Lecter will get him anywhere.

"And how did you realize you could do that?"

— hardly a story he wants to tell, one that carefully bears many of his early sorrows, but there are enough truths he can wring from it to satisfy Will —

“That isn’t a conversation to be had over tea.” Hannibal folds his hands in his lap. Without looking too obviously in the direction of Will’s cupboards, he asks, “When was the last time you had a proper meal?”

The frustration ticking in Will’s jaw suddenly melts away and he blinks in surprise.

“Depends on your definition,” he says. That is its own answer, and by the way Will scrubs a hand over the back of his neck, he knows it. “I meant to go out today. For groceries. Was just working up to it when you arrived.”

Hannibal leaves Will to his blushes and checks his pocket watch. By the time they returned to his home— *if the promise of answers and a hot meal can tempt Will Graham* —it would be late enough that he could consider preparations for dinner.

He flicks a quick glance back to Will and the suggestions of gauntness in his cheekbones.

— *and something to tide him over until then* —

“I wouldn’t brave the grocer’s at this hour,” Hannibal says. “If you’d be amenable, I suggest we continue our conversation over dinner. I should be returning to prepare, anyhow.”

Will looks distinctly uncomfortable before he gets up and resumes his pacing.

“Surely you have better things to do with your evening,” he protests, though something in his tone sounds as if he hopes Hannibal doesn’t. “Patients that aren’t me.”

Hannibal watches him walk, twitch his way through whatever’s flying around in his head, fiddle with his shirt— *still in grave need of pressing.* Pressing or no, he is more than happy to usher Will out the door just as he is.

“Nothing pleases me more than dinner with company. I routinely host friends and colleagues, sometimes on far shorter notice.”

Will shakes his head— *it looks like capitulation* —and gestures at himself . “I—I need to go change, then. If you’re set on this.”

“I rarely change my mind. Please, change, if you wish, though it’s hardly required,” Hannibal says and stands. He moves back to the counter to collect his things and grabs the stethoscope from where he’d left it, before he adds, “And you aren’t my patient. Unless you’d like to be.”

Will stills, one hand on the doorframe. “I don’t know. What else would I be?”

Hannibal slips the stethoscope back in its place and snaps the bag shut.

“You can be anything you like, Mr. Graham.”

He doesn’t respond for a long moment. Then, he says, “Call me Will.”

Only when Will rounds the corner out of sight does Hannibal smile. Actually smile.

Whatever you do decide to be, Will, it will be thoroughly beyond my ability to predict.

Will dresses quickly, the better not to think. He drags on a less wrinkled shirt, a pair of trousers he didn't try to attack a man in, an actual tie. Waistcoat, dinner jacket. He doesn't take the time to shave and his hair refuses to cooperate, as usual, but by the time he descends back into the main hall, he's as ready as he'll be, hat in hand and spectacles in place, in case he needs the interference.

It's only then that he realizes that he shouldn't have left Lecter unsupervised.

He finds Lecter back in the dining room-turned-study, bent over the lure on Will's desk with one finger pressed to the hook. Nothing else appears to have been moved, except in the disarray from their struggle, but Will feels—invaded. He has made this one room his sanctuary. Of course Lecter would return to it. Or perhaps it's only that the room is an oddity, a jumble of furniture that shouldn't all be in one place.

"I prefer to keep my work somewhere more private than the front parlor," he says pointedly, scowling at the intrusion. "Though the lack of windows does make for an obscene lighting bill."

Lecter presses down too hard, as if startled. Blood beads on his finger.

"Naturally. I also value my privacy," he says, tamping quickly down with his thumb and straightening up. He doesn't even sound a bit shamed. "I don't have many colleagues or patients who fish for sport. Most prefer to hunt."

"I've done both. Fishing suits me better."

Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that he feels calmer when fishing, and calm is hard to come by.

He eyes Lecter, almost second-guessing his decision to accompany him—but not quite. "I presume you're ready?"

Lecter smooths a hand down the front of his coat, then picks up his bag. "You presume correctly."

"Let's be on our way, then," he says, pointedly.

Will glances at the hook for just a moment, then leads the way to the front door. Lecter is too polite not to follow (though not too polite not to snoop).

oOo

Lecter lives on the northwest side of the city, nearly opposite to Will's rowhouse near the docks. He brings Will inside with very little talking or fanfare, personally taking his jacket and hanging it beside his own in the coat room. There's no sign of a butler. Will surrenders his hat as well, but not the spectacles. Lecter leads him back into the bowels of the house, turning on the gaslights as they go.

They emerge into a gleaming modern kitchen. It, too, is a far cry from Will's barely functional space, and is clearly well-used. There's no sign of a cook, either, and Lecter indicates for Will to sit as he disappears into what Will guesses is his larder. He returns a moment later with a cheese dish and a bunch of grapes.

"It will take me some time to prepare our meal," Lecter says, as if this is the most natural thing in the world, setting out two plates. "You're free to stay here, if you wish. This should tide you over better than tea. Something to drink?"

"If I wish. Does that mean I can also take my turn snooping?" After a moment's consideration, Will plucks a grape and eats it. Rationally, he shouldn't drink when in uncertain territory, but he supposes he's in no more danger than he was at home. A glass of wine would hardly unman him. "I'll let you select the beverages, since you appear to have the run of the place. No staff?"

Lecter pulls down two glasses, sets one on his side of the butcher block, the other on Will's. "Hired only, not permanent. I prefer to shop and cook for myself, though I employ plenty of extra hands when the occasion calls for it. As for prying, quid pro quo," he concedes with an amused smile of his own. "You'll find the drawing room to your right and though I don't have a piano, I do have a harpsichord."

He leaves Will to his own devices again.

Will doesn't wander. He tells himself it's because he'll have a better opportunity while Lecter is cooking (*cooking* ! Like a working man! Like an unmarried working man. Like Will. Is the good doctor unmarried? He must be, or the wife would be home), but really, he's not quite ready to be alone. Surprising, given the day's events, but he tries not to lie to himself about the little things.

He does take the opportunity to eat an honestly shocking amount of cheese in that momentary privacy.

Will's only just slowed down when he hears the faintest whisper of a step, the Mark shivering along his skin. He turns to see Lecter emerge from the larder with a bottle of wine in hand, moving almost silently, as if he might take Will unawares.

The Mark, for once, is a comfort.

"Have you always cooked for yourself," Will asks, "or is it a result of the privacy the Mark generally requires?"

Lecter considers as he pours them both wine. "My family had live-in staff when I was a boy, but I have been cooking for myself since university. I am used to it, but I also enjoy it, and the privacy is a welcome side effect."

More bustling, Lecter retrieving an apron and a covered dish, which he sets on a counter such that his back is now to Will.

"You have further questions," he says, without preamble.

“Let’s start with the one you dodged by focusing on feeding me,” Will says, taking up his wine glass. “How did you realize what your Mark did? Was it uncontrollable at first?”

He takes his first sip, and has to pause at the slight head rush he gets from it. The lack of good meals really is getting to him—or perhaps just the extremes of the last two weeks.

Lecter doesn’t respond immediately, but Will doesn’t press, watching as he gathers a robust range of ingredients. Finally, as he turns the hob on and sets a pot of water to boil, he answers.

“I was a young man at the time, hadn’t had the Mark for long. I only discovered I could possess others because I was attacked. There’s not much to remember about the fight itself, but when my attacker tried to strangle me, I found myself lifting out of my own body and into his, crushing my own throat as if his hand were mine. It took me nearly a year to fully control it.”

Another fight, Will notes, though he assumes many litter Lecter’s past. He takes a larger drink of his wine, put at ease by the man’s openness. It’s not full transparency, of course, but neither was Will’s. That Lecter isn’t changing the subject is progress enough.

“A useful discovery, and well-timed,” Will muses. “And far more immediately helpful than spawning a violent double during a panic attack.”

“It was helpful in the end,” Lecter agrees, “but it came from the same instinct as the one that spawned your double. Panic attacks are a crossed wire of sorts, the body trying to protect itself from immediate danger when none exists.”

“I wonder,” Will says, considering his glass instead of the span of Lecter’s shoulders, “if these... *abilities* arise from a protective impulse, rather than the destructive one the Inquisitors claim.”

As he had assumed. Feared.

It would change things, if the Mark was designed to help him, instead of bringing his nightmares to the surface. But it wouldn’t change things *enough* , not until his particular cocktail of neuroses no longer leads him to lash out in the wrong settings.

Lecter, of course, doesn’t seem to share that problem.

“Protective impulses can destroy just as injurious ones can save a life. The only difference is instinct, or in certain cases, intention,” the doctor says, and lays meat into the pan, not yet hot enough to spit. “I suspect this will hardly be the only time you will find yourself wondering at the Inquisitors’ claims.”

“Have you ever met another with a Mark?” Will asks, watching the man’s movements in the kitchen. They’re confident. Fluid. Somewhat hypnotic.

“I’ve seen several Marked dead,” Lecter replies. “As for the living, only two, but I wouldn’t say I truly met them.”

“I haven't met any. I've thought for some time, though, that perhaps the Ripper possesses one.” Will’s mind flicks over the reports and illustrations of the crime scenes, the lurid details and the qualities that others call horror, and he…well, the definition is less certain. It is horror, but it’s also beauty. Intentionality. He’s never picked up a single hint of desperation, or anger, or confusion, though he’s been only reading between the lines of others’ analyses and variable record keeping. “A month ago it was a vague thought; now, knowing how much stronger and faster I’ve become—” and how increasingly beset by his own darkness, defensively or otherwise. “—it seems more plausible.”

“Strength and speed are hardly the only hallmarks of the Marked,” Lecter says as he shifts to chopping greens.

“Of course not, and I can’t guess at any other skill he might possess, but just those two basic alterations would explain a great deal. There’s a reason the papers treat him with such breathless reverence, despite Crawford’s protests. He’s a bogeyman. He can strike anywhere, manages feats of stealth and brutality that are unthinkable and never leaves a single trace.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised Jack has you climbing inside this particular killer’s head. I’ve heard the Ripper has caused him a great deal of grief in the past.”

Will rubs at his face, skewing his spectacles for a moment, then heaves a sigh. “Jack has me on every case, or at least it feels like it. But the Ripper…he didn’t have to ask me for that one.”

“I can’t see him yet. Though I wonder, if I could make out the shape of him—do you think that a double summoned on his pattern could provide some manner of answer?” But even as he says it, he shakes his head. “No. No, it wouldn’t work. Or it wouldn’t work any better than what I already do in the safety of my own mind. It would just be—remarkably dangerous. One of him is enough.”

Lecter is silent for a moment, thoughtful. Or, perhaps, afraid. Will winces. Lecter has, until this point, been unnaturally accommodating, but even he must have his limit. The idea of Will being able to conjure such a monster—

“I agree that it would be dangerous,” Lecter says, interrupting his spiraling thoughts, “but it might be useful in ways that you’re not imagining. Only in learning the boundaries of our gifts do we finally begin to move from reaction to intention, though it wouldn’t be prudent to begin by doubling the Ripper.”

He turns away from his cooking only long enough to top up Will’s glass. Will watches him, stunned.

“How do you see these killers, Will?” he asks. “How does that particular gift work?”

Hannibal is curious as to what it’s like to walk through the darkened halls of killers’ minds and back out again. He wonders if it’s more an exercise in imagination or in empathy. Possibly both.

— his halls are dark and bloodsoaked and there's a chance Will Graham could leave footprints there, too —

A distinct likelihood, given Will is working on the Ripper case. His case. That comes with its own unexpected shiver of satisfaction, just on the edge of possessive—Will could be halfway to seeing him already, the fine line between setting the stage for events to unfold and recklessness.

He wants to keep Will's attention, but Will breaks the little look first with a quick, pained smile as he addresses the ceiling— *easily dissipating all consternation over having to choose between watching Will and overcooking their meal*.

"Outside of the Mark?" Will says. "It's like…I become them. I see through their eyes, feel what they feel. A form of empathy and elaborate imagination, but I'm very rarely wrong, especially when I've seen more than one of their victims. The evidence is always there, the pieces, it's just that the pattern that they form is only visible from a certain angle."

The explanation is more understandable than Hannibal expected. He knows what it's like to

process the world from the optic chiasm of a stranger, to feel spikes of adrenaline drive their hearts to beat themselves senseless against their ribs— *his own pulse barely rises, even in the throes of a kill.*

I want to know what you see.

— if it's victims Will needs, he can provide; negatives, perhaps, to help Will understand the positives —

Will goes on, "But it can be hard to shed the mindset after. Like cutting out a piece of myself. Some are…stickier than others. My thoughts continue on in the pattern they laid out. And that's what the doubles draw from, an externalized physical manifestation of when I can't return to myself."

Hannibal pulls both the seared duck and the farro off the hob and scours the pan with white wine before heading to the sink to drain the grains.

He says, "I wonder if the doubles could help you shed these mindsets, if you have trouble fighting a way back to yourself."

He chances a glance over at Will, who has fallen suddenly silent.

"An exorcism?" Will finally murmurs, after at least a minute's paralysis. He frowns at his wine, then sets it aside. "But it doesn't—it doesn't feel like it *takes* from me. It feels like it copies. Do you really think…?"

"I can't know for certain," Hannibal answers carefully. "That would require some trial and error."

— at its core, it's another selfish impulse, to find the lines between Will Graham and the killers that haunt him, to see what he becomes when he is no one but utterly himself; if his

whispers guide Will there, so be it —

He sets the pot aside and finds that Will is staring at him, stunned.

“One of the great misimaginings of power is that it labels, determines and twists the self. That it marks.” Hannibal meets Will’s gaze—*and there’s something new there he hasn’t seen before; it’s almost trust*. “Power doesn’t define. It reveals. But you can’t know what it will reveal unless you use it.”

"In and of itself, it doesn't corrupt," Will rephrases, and there's a little wonder in his voice. "It has the potential to do so, but that isn't its first and primary nature. Someone's greatest strength may also be what makes them the most dangerous to others. Like the Shrike. His love and his desire to defend that love wasn't evil at its core, but its manifestation was."

Hannibal nods and returns to the counter with the farro, leaving Will to think and consider his next questions, and sets to minding the duck sauce. Stock, plenty of orange juice, freshly squeezed into the pan. Butter, after it thickens.

"In that case, what strength of yours does possessing another's body derive from?” Will asks.

“Significant anatomical knowledge. I haven’t always been a physician, but I’ve always been a student of the human form through art,” he suggests— *control is the more likely source, or the desire to see how other people’s minds work, a temperature reading by which he can measure the strength of his own human veil*. He pulls out plates from the cupboards above him. “Which would make yours understanding. Empathy.”

"A double edged sword by its very nature," Will agrees. "Unfortunately, I don't think the Inquisitors are interested in updating their understanding of the Mark.”

Hannibal hums in amused agreement at the sword comment— *double-edged indeed*.

He turns slightly to look at Will, eyes glittering. “At the risk of exposing myself to further heresy, I’d say updating their understanding is not in their best interest. Control is more easily maintained when one has full, inerrant jurisdiction over fact and fiction.”

“Much easier to mete out death when your criteria are black and white.” Will considers his wine. “I never asked *how* you gained your Mark. A dream, like I experienced? Or..."

He trails off but Hannibal’s hands grow very still for a second too long.

— he isn’t even certain if there was a dream; he had been awake or asleep or both at the same time; impossible, just like the voice that had come to him out of the dark; ageless, sexless, unearthly, from everywhere or nowhere at all —

He’s spared from having to construct a neat and satisfactory answer when Will comes to the counter beside him, just as he pulls the sauce off the heat.

"Can I help at all?" he asks, quietly, nodding to the dishes.

“You’re my guest, Will, that’s not required,” Hannibal says— *though part of him doesn’t want Will to go far*. “The dining room is through the second door on the right. Please feel free to sit down, I’ll be in shortly.”

Hannibal gives him a small, warm smile— *encouragement* —but Will hesitates, searching his face with that soft canted frown of his that sometimes looks as if it wants to pull itself into a smile. He lets Will’s gaze dance from point to point, inventorying, studying— *what do you see?*

"Alright,” Will says, “if you're sure.”

And at Hannibal’s nod, he heads out of the kitchen. Alone, Hannibal finishes mixing the rest of the ingredients into the cooling farro and sets to slicing and plating the duck. Perfectly cooked, even with Will’s verbal parries— *neither a particular challenge nor distraction; he always appreciates an audience.*

He adds the farro salad, bright and acidic, then dresses the duck with artful lines of sauce and the plate with half-moon orange slices. He brings the table settings into the dining room first — *one for the head of the table and one for the seat to the right* —then his glass and the rest of the wine bottle. He doesn’t disturb Will, who seems rather interested in the artful design of fragrant herbs on his wall, until he brings in both plates.

“Duck breast with orange sauce,” Hannibal says, setting them down, “and warm farro salad.”

Will takes his seat, openly staring at the food.

“This is astounding,” he says when he finally looks up. “And far more than you needed to do for me.”

“Then I hope I won’t offend you terribly if I say I set the duck in marinade earlier today and would have prepared it regardless,” Hannibal replies— *he only basks a little in the complement and doesn’t take Will looking at him for granted* . “Do you often prepare the fish you catch? Yourself, I mean.”

Will’s lips twitch with another self-deprecating smile. “Yes, though it’s markedly more… rustic.”

Hannibal takes a moment to savor his wine— *it will pair well; it usually does, though unlike learning other aspects of the kitchen, that didn’t come as naturally* —and lingers, surreptitiously watching Will take his first bite.

He’s not disappointed. Will tries to hold his reaction at bay— *from hunger or embarrassment, impossible to say* —but Hannibal catches the soft flutter of his dark lashes and a soft, smothered choked breath— *surprise, pleasure, both*. He takes another drink and wishes he could swallow that sound down with it.

Will swallows hard, then takes a sip of wine. “You’re—very skilled, Dr. Lecter. At a great number of things.”

“I have many passions,” Hannibal says with a pleased smile— *not viciously so, not enough to scare Will off* —and turns his attention to his own plate. “Over the years, I’ve dedicated time to developing them.”

“Anatomy, medicine, cooking. Music.” Will considers for a moment, then pauses, fork halfway to his mouth and adds, “Drawing unstable monster hunters from their lairs?”

It’s a jab at himself as much as at Lecter, and he flushes a little, at which point the food seems the better refuge.

Of course, that just means he’s tipped back into the sensory overwhelm and delight of it. It might be the best thing he’s ever tasted. He simultaneously wants to eat all of it, as quickly as he can, and draw out each bite, already grieving its eventual end.

“The last one I’d hardly consider a passion,” Lecter corrects with a chuckle. Will watches him savor each of his own bites . “More of a newfound hobby. An accidental discovery.” A pause, and then his brow furrows and he asks, “You consider yourself unstable?”

“It’s less of a consideration and more of a fact,” Will says, with another pained smile, despite the momentary relief at this not being a habit of Lecter’s, feeding wayward profilers. “Hard to be stable when your mind isn’t always—or even often—your own.”

He shifts to eating the stewed grains, hoping they’ll be a safe resting place for his overwhelmed palate and stomach, but while it’s less unctuous, it’s by no means less flavorful. He’s not sure he’s ever had a meal so good that it made him want to run away, but this has been a strange day all around.

He drinks the rest of his wine a little too fast.

Lecter reaches over and smoothly, calmly, refills his glass.

“I don’t think you’re unstable, Will,” he says. “I think Jack Crawford has stranded you upriver without a paddle.”

Will peers at Lecter over the rim of his glasses. “I felt unstable long before Jack Crawford. It’s just made it a little more obvious to everybody else. But I appreciate the attempt.”

That’s a lie. Really, he wishes he hadn’t said anything, because Lecter looks unlikely to let it go. He has put his belly on display, and can already feel the teeth nearing.

He grimaces and sits back, looking at his half-finished plate. “It’s been a very long day. And this may be too rich for my blood. I should go.”

“And do what exactly?” Lecter levels a look at him, not unkind, but firm. “If you think you can hide from this, you’re looking in the wrong corner. Right or wrong, you are not the same man as the one who walked through the minds of killers before the Mark, just as who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today. This—”

He reaches up and presses a finger against his collar, beneath which his Mark lurks.

“—is the point that marks past from future. It is change. Don’t you crave change, Will?”

Will glares at him.

The intensity of his anger takes him completely by surprise. It’s a defensive reaction to the total sensory overload of the food, the constant complexity of the conversation, even the way his body aches from their brief but violent altercation. It’s all too much, leaving him a frayed nerve, and while he can understand the source of his outrage, he can’t articulate it.

Hannibal takes another drink and nods to Will’s plate. “That will get cold.”

It’s all Will can do not to pick right back up where they left off, not to lunge across the corner of the table at him. It feels good to want to do that. He’s so tired of being civil.

But he doesn’t move. And he doesn’t let his anger pour into the shadow of him that wants to form in the doorway, and he also doesn’t grab Lecter by the cravat and shut him up with a fierce, biting kiss.

He *does* go very still, brain quieting, as soon as he parses that last impulse.

Anger turns to embarrassed confusion, and Will ducks his head to take another bite. Chews. Swallows. Clears his throat.

Through it all, Lecter doesn’t look away. Doesn’t so much as flinch. Just watches, placid and implacable.

“So what do you propose we do?” Will asks finally, voice a little rougher. “To understand this *change*.”

Lecter takes another bite of dinner, chews thoughtfully, then says, “We could start with a bit of experimentation.”

“Sure, fine,” Will agrees, too quickly. An experiment seems like a good place to start. Organized action to test a reaction. Better than this—wandering, theorizing, baring of souls.

He feels a lot more *bared* than Lecter is.

“What do you have in mind?”

Lecter merely gestures with his fork and says, “Finish your dinner.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Will stares down at the wreckage beneath him. The double's face no longer looks like a face at all. There is nothing left but the silent shell of his own body.

Will stifles a low moan of terror. He can't tear his eyes away from his own corpse.

(Not his corpse. He is living and breathing flesh. He is in pain. He could speak, if he chose to. But—but—then what—)

"I'm dead," he whispers.

--

Will and Hannibal conduct an experiment.

For as much as Will has pushed back against Hannibal where generosity is concerned, he sets to finishing his meal without complaint. Hannibal recognizes the way he eats, caught between savoring and devouring— *the uncertain place of the intermittently hungry; he had lived there, too, once upon a time.* He keeps a careful— *hopefully discreet* —watch on Will's demeanor as he continues to eat and drink. Reservations don't quite slip off him, but he's carefully unwinding.

Hannibal works through his own plate in relative silence, sifting through his own curiosities. He's particularly keen on examining one of Will's doubles face to face, rather than at the mercy of its hand. He wants to explore the edges of their capability, to learn the limits of their sentience.

"I suggest starting simple: intentionally conjuring a double," Hannibal says. "An exercise in control in a safe environment, since it seems I can dispel the doubles quickly."

"Another fight?" Will asks. It sounds almost teasing and Hannibal has to resist the urge to smile. "I probably shouldn't have any more wine then, if it's an *exercise in control* ."

— if teasing and stolen, slender smiles is what wine is going to get him, he may yet offer Will more —

"No, not a fight. And it isn't strictly that kind of control, so please, don't restrict yourself," he answers— *a compromise then; either way, he is always eager to bring the darkness out to play, to coax the caterpillar from the chrysalis*.

Except for the minute relaxing of his shoulders as he picks at the last of his meal, Will is unreadable as ever. He takes a pointed sip of wine. “Care to tell me more details about this experiment, or do I need to just soak up the anticipation?”

At that, Hannibal does smile. And tracks the movement of the glass to Will’s mouth.

“No need to dwell on specifics before their time. But if you’re finished, we can begin. The drawing room will suffice, I think.”

Will takes one last bite of duck— *there’s scraps left but he doesn’t begrudge Will this*. He finishes his wine, then nods and pushes back in his chair. He glances around, as if he could see the layout of the house through the walls.

Hannibal collects his own dish before reaching out for Will’s. “It’s back through the kitchen, the door closest to the hall.”

He returns to the kitchen first and busies himself long enough to let Will escape to the drawing room before returning for glasses and bottle, as well as place settings. Will has left his spectacles behind, and Hannibal retrieves those as well. He leaves them on the kitchen island, and the dishes in the basin for later— *normally not easy to ignore, but his attention is firmly elsewhere*. After a moment’s thought, Hannibal heads to the butler’s pantry— *already outfitted with hooks to hold uniform outerwear for any waitstaff* —and divests himself of his jacket and waistcoat— *much more preferable to fight in, if it does indeed come to that.*

At this point, he puts nothing past Will. The thought makes him smile.

He’s carefully cuffing his sleeves to the elbows when he makes his way into the drawing room. With its books, art, and harpsichord, it is as expensive and carefully-curated as the rest of his home— *not just his home but his life; the macabre rubbing shoulders with the high-brow, designed to unsettle just a little; the easiest way to discourage people from looking too closely for stones to turn over is to give them something to look at.*

Will paces restlessly. Hannibal wonders how long he’s been at it.

“This exercise relies somewhat on your peace of mind,” he says just as Will turns to look at him. “Are you comfortable, Will?”

— he doesn’t miss the way Will’s gaze dips to his forearms; a pleasant surprise —

"Not yet," Will answers, then takes himself to a plush armchair and sits down. "But I can endeavor to get myself there."

Hannibal finishes pinning his cuffs in place. “Excellent.”

He slides all the curtains closed before taking the armchair across from Will, a decent space of floor between them. It’s an ideal place for something shadowy to manifest; they dissipate into nothing but smoke, leaving the carpet in no danger of staining.

He pointedly doesn’t think of Will’s eyes on him— *yes, pointedly; it takes effort.*

“From what you’ve described, the ability to double is coupled with fear or anger and thus relies on reaction. Instinct. Control lies in both understanding the underlying mechanism and in interrupting the pathway that naturally connects instinct to power,” Hannibal explains, propping his clasped hands on his knee. “You say these killers stay with you. I want you to take your time to relax and, when you feel calm, go into that dark place inside you and bring something back.”

Will regards him, contemplative. "Aim for a place of curiosity instead of fear?"

“If curiosity is preferable,” Hannibal says, “then yes.”

Will hesitates, but eventually, he leans back in his chair, hands on the armrests. Hannibal watches the lines of his body unwind at long last, eyes fluttering shut. He’s not overly troubled by notions of deity— *not even the voice from the turbulent dark that he can sometimes hear echo through the Mark on his skin* —but he considers a quick prayer to anyone listening that Will’s knees stay gently knocked apart, that the drape of his calloused fingers stays unintentional and simple in its beauty. He doesn’t have enough time— *or permission, though that has hardly stopped him before* —to sketch Will like this. To preserve this fragile, suspended moment of vulnerability in charcoal and chiaroscuro.

After a long, quiet moment, Will’s head shifts, pulling the pale column of his throat out from under the shadow of his chin. The room’s low lamps edge the high points of his face in gold.

Hannibal swallows. “What do you see?”

Will has found his calm in a memory: a trip outside the city, ostensibly to interview witnesses, but, in the end, almost a vacation. He'd fished three days in a row, standing in the smooth flow of a minor river. The killer had been easy to understand, easy to let go of after he was in custody. There had been no guilt. No anxiety for what he might be missing.

"I’m in the River Ouse," he tells Hannibal, "or a tributary of it, at least. Early spring. The water is cold and fast from the fells."

He'd let the quiet of the stream carry him away that day. He wants to let it do the same now.

But that's not what he's here for. Not what Lecter wants to hear about, either. *Go into that dark place inside you and bring something back.* Will scans the banks, looking at the shades who crowd the water's edge, waiting to be acknowledged.

"The whole gallery is here, at the river," he murmurs, voice distant, abstracted. "They watch me. And now I'll watch back."

Closest to him is Eldon Stammets, one hand outstretched. He was a violent man only at the very end, killing incidentally in his search for connection. He is the safest option, if Will wants to bring somebody through without risk of an attack. Hobbs, a little further down, holds his daughter tight as he whispers into her ear. More than Stammets, he looks vibrant and alive, a revenant instead of a ghost. Easier to call on, but Will knows exactly how dangerous and uncontrollable he can be.

And there, a little beyond—

The Ripper.

Will can’t look away. The Ripper is too well-defined. He should be only a dark form in a dark place, not yet fully visible; that's always how he has appeared, half-seen and ephemeral, a blood-slick ghost. And yet the Ripper lurks, not at the river's edge, but certainly out of the trees. His form is indistinct still, blacked-out like a creature made of tar, but he is closer.

The Mark, Will thinks. The Mark has connected them, given him a window in. He feels the impulse to approach it.

But Lecter is waiting for him. Will makes himself turn away, back to Stammets and his outstretched hand. The Mark stirs on his breast. The air around him, back in Lecter's drawing room, begins to change.

He wants to open his eyes, but the moment feels too tenuous. The river rushes around his calves.

“Who have you brought me, Will?” Lecter asks. His voice is measured and gentle, and Will can hear his breathing. Even. In control.

They are not alone, but whatever is in the room with them is quiescent.

"Eldon Stammets," Will says. "A naturalist specializing in fungal colony growth.” Around him, the water slows, and from the depths rise the vivid crowns of fly agaric, the dripping peaks of inky caps, the golden net of a slime mold. They bump against Will’s hands, and on the banks, Stammets’s eyes close in the sublime relief of contact. “I became convinced that mycelia not only communicate within their kind, but can bridge other consciousnesses. I buried ten people alive in an attempt to connect them. To connect *us* ."

He's distantly aware that he's speaking *as* Stammets now. But it doesn't feel like acting. It never does.

“The structure of a fungus mirrors that of the human brain. An intricate web of connections,” Lecter murmurs. The sound of his voice makes Will’s chest ache with a deep and profound longing. “No human mind can connect in this way. Except yours.”

"I just want to understand," he says, voice cracking slightly with desperation. With devastation. "I want you to listen."

“I am listening.”

Lecter’s voice comes from somewhere closer, but not close *enough*. If Will holds his breath, he can hear his footsteps, muffled but not silenced by the rug. And in between Lecter and himself—the double he cannot see.

Inside himself, Will feels—something. A momentary easing of the crushing loneliness in Stammets’s head that mirrors his own. He shivers.

His eyes open, finally, and he sees them both, Lecter and his double. Their hands are touching. Its flesh is matte black tar, unnatural but emphatically solid. It looks like Will. It isn't Will.

"What are you doing to it?" Will asks, breathless.

It's not attacking.

"In life, this man was reaching out for others and only now can some form of him finally reach back. I'm giving him what he was looking for," Lecter explains, voice low, as if the double between them might startle.

It visibly trembles under his touch.

Will is shaking, too. His mind is bifurcated. In one breath, he is his double, the memory of Stammets, and he is being offered connection, finally, *finally*. And in the other, Stammets is several feet away, and Lecter is touching him, not Will. It's like a knife, sliding between his ribs.

"Will," Lecter says. "Can you hear me?"

His breathing hitches. The knife retreats, but not far. Lecter's eyes are fixed on his double, and Will wants to scream.

"Yes. I can hear you," he whispers instead.

He's so lonely. Lonely and—and *jealous*, he realizes, as he watches his double lace its fingers together with Lecter's.

He doesn't want to see this. He comes very close to trying to banish the shadow; it wouldn't take much. Instead, he stands, though his knees are jelly. Will draws closer to the two of them.

"We're—we're still connected, the double and I, but it's tenuous. So thin. I can't speak for it anymore, I don't know what it will do next."

Which is odd, because if it were a person, he would have a fairly good idea.

Lecter smiles. He doesn't let go of the double. But he does, at last, meet Will's eyes.

"That's because it isn't you," he says. "That thin connection is the place where you end and Stammets begins. See if you can reach for that thread. Find *you* and find *him.* Then sever it."

He squeezes the double's fingers tightly.

"And if you can't, just let go. I do not think it will long survive you."

The double isn't him; that's what Will has known all along, isn't it? He wants to accept Lecter's explanation so badly, look for that difference, cut it from him. But it's not true, not exactly.

He can't predict what his double will do precisely because it *isn't* separate from him.

It *is* him. Him through a lens, not a mask. Every element of Stammets that resonated with him is preserved in the double, but it's not Stammets at all. It's the loneliness in Will, given form enough to make a man.

And so when Will goes to look at his connection to his double, he doesn't see a thread; he sees a black hole in the outline of his own body.

And through that hole he can feel Lecter's hand, faintly, faintly.

Not faintly at all.

Will blinks, and his hand is in Lecter's hand, held tight. His skin is pink. Every element of him is as it should be.

As it can't be.

Hannibal's Mark flares. A flood of sensation, liquid and electric, surges through muscle, tendon, bone.

He regathers his dispersive will when color suddenly crawls down the length of the double's arm, swallowing the black until Hannibal feels tepid fingers grow hot against his skin. Inhumanly quick, he slips his hand from the double's— *Will's?* —and slides it up to grip his wrist. A pulse flutters under his touch.

Hannibal's gaze snaps from wrist to trembling chest to neck to gently parted lips to shocking blue eyes. The brush of his startled fingers on Hannibal's wrist sends another lazy lick of feeling through the Mark.

It's Will's pulse, wrist, skin, under his touch now.

Over his shoulder, the double looms where Will once stood. Tense, inky jaw high and tight, something burning in the empty depths of its horrified white, white gaze. It looks almost like...jealousy.

Bemused and intrigued, Hannibal murmurs, "That was unexpected."

Whatever this is, he was wrong about it— *not particularly concerning, as all Will Graham has done in their short tenure together is surprise him.* The seething double behind Will, however, merits some measure of attention.

But it doesn't receive it, because Will steps closer to him, gaze hazy and searching. The fingers of his free hand ghost over Hannibal's throat— *for an instant, he is grateful for the cloth layers between them; a touch this tender already nudges at something small inside him, there's no saying what it would do right over the Mark —*

The hand moves to the back of Hannibal's neck. Will's expression is somewhere between wonder and desperate longing, as if he's starving, an echo of the double's gaze—only there is

life in it, and heat, and a flare of determination.

Will pulls him close and kisses him.

—his world is Will's mouth and Will's lips, just slightly chapped but he tastes like orange and wine and something he doesn't know the taste of, thoughts unravelling, spooling themselves out of existence—

Hannibal softens his mouth and kisses him back. Will makes a small, desperate sound against his lips and he wants to swallow it.

And then he's gone.

Hannibal opens his eyes to see the double dragging Will to the ground, black fingers closed around Will's throat. He doesn't lunge after them, only watches them fall and struggle. The double's face contorts in pain and that white-hot jealousy—the pattern of a man desperate for connection, seeing it being stolen from him.

Will's expression matches it as his fist he smashes into the double's face.

— breathtakingly violent —

The double's grip loosens and Will seizes the opening, rolling and pinning the double to the ground. His fist draws back once more.

— it's righteous and vivid and he feels it like an ache —

Will's knuckles go dripping and sludgy with black as he strikes over and over and over. Hannibal feels a winging thrill in his stomach like he's falling, like there's blood in his mouth *— no, no blood, only whatever Will Graham tastes like.*

— beautiful —

He doesn't move an inch. He doesn't want any of it to end.

But it does. With startling silence. Only when Will sits back, staring at the pulpy mess he's made of the double's face, does Hannibal finally move. He crouches down at Will's side and lifts one of Will's hands in both of his. Under the black, his knuckles are a mess, bleeding and skin split like old fruit.

"Don't go inside, Will," Hannibal says, even and calm— *because when is he anything but.* "Stay with me."

Will stares down at the wreckage beneath him. The double's face no longer looks like a face at all. There is nothing left but the silent shell of his own body.

Will stifles a low moan of terror. He can't tear his eyes away from his own corpse.

(*Not his corpse. He is living and breathing flesh. He is in pain. He could speak, if he chose to. But — but — then what —*)

"I'm dead," he whispers, shuddering. There's no other explanation; this body he's in now, the one Lecter had approached and touched and held, had come from nothing, from his mind, from the Mark. As Will watches, the double that was once him begins to melt and dissipate, and he cries out, reaching for it. If it goes, what does that leave him?

But he can't hold onto it. It is only smoke, then haze, then air.

He is left with a body that looks just like his own. It obeys him as well as it ever has. His shoulder, where he was stabbed years ago, is still tight. Lecter's hand on his is still warm. The Mark still smolders on his chest.

He turns to look fully at Lecter, haunted, only barely seeing. He'd kissed this man. This man he only just met, this man who is dangerous, and was that Will who kissed him? Or was that some distilled part of himself he now inhabits, a part condemned to longing?

Is he trapped? Transformed?

"What have I done?" Will pleads. "Tell me what I just did, I don't understand."

At first, Lecter offers nothing, and Will's hands spasm in his grasp. Then he strokes a thumb over the back of Will's hand.

"It appears you moved," Lecter says, with calm confidence. "Fully transported yourself from one body to another, and by inhabiting your double's body, transformed it in some way. By all appearances you are flesh and blood, with a strong heartbeat—" he presses a finger down onto one of Will's nails and watches the color change. "—and excellent capillary refill. A full examination could prove revealing, but in this moment…"

He cups Will's neck, thumb just brushing his ear.

"You are Will Graham," he says. "And you're alive."

Will shakes his head, lifting one of his hands—now marred only by his own blood, the shadow-stuff gone away with the body—and covering Lecter's where it touches his skin, his hair.

It feels good, grounding, but also too much. He's pinned between wanting to lean into it more and wanting to tear himself away and run.

Lecter's explanation makes sense, but Will doesn't trust it. Can't trust it.

"I don't know," he whispers, helplessly. "I can't tell if I'm different. What if I'm different? What if I'm not—not the original? Only a cloud of dark and buzzing flies transmuted into flesh, but still rotted at the core."

Lecter wouldn't even notice, would he? They haven't known each other long enough. Barely half a day.

“Neither the body nor the mind are entirely immutable,” Lecter murmurs, and Will wants to sink into his voice. Hide in it. “Actions, environments, people—these all change us. Every creative act has its destructive consequence. The only original you was the one pulled screaming from his mother’s womb, and even then, the very first breath of air in his lungs changed him fundamentally.”

He slips his hand out from under Will’s and pulls his cravat free, tugs his collar open enough to bare the Mark. Lecter reaches back for Will and gently lifts his shaking fingers to it. And presses them down. Hard.

A skitter of power licks between Will’s skin and his.

“You may be different,” Lecter says, “but you are still just you.”

The Mark on his chest pulses in response, making Will’s breath hitch. He sways closer, and there is it is again, that alien impulse to close the last of the distance between them. To kiss Lecter again.

And now he knows Lecter would kiss him back.

Will doesn’t kiss him, but he does stroke the pattern of the Mark. The impossible hum between them shouldn’t be real, but is. Has been, all day. And Will learned early on that his doubles don’t possess it, can’t use it. They are only made by it. Otherwise, they would spawn copies of themselves *ad infinitum* .

Slowly, the confines of his body begin to feel like his again. Just as uncomfortable as ever.

“I’m a version of myself who has killed something wearing my own face,” Will murmurs, gaze drifting up from Lecter’s throat to his eyes.

“We are all versions of ourselves and we all happen to ourselves in one way or another,” Lecter agrees, and lifts Will’s other hand. “This will be easier to manage in the kitchen. Can you stand?”

Will is confused for just a moment, and then the pain in his hand actually registers. He drops his other hand from Lecter’s throat and nods, swallowing thickly.

“Should be able to,” he says, and when he tries, his legs work.

He’s exhausted, though. He’s not sure how he’s going to get himself home.

Lecter steers them both back into the kitchen, one hand held gently to Will’s shoulder. On the way in, he grabs a work stool from the back of the larder and coaxes Will onto it at the prep table. He leaves briefly, only to return with his medical bag and fill a shallow bowl with hot water from the tap back by the stove. He lets it cool slightly while he washes his hands, his forearms, all the way up to his elbows.

Will watches this all as if from a great distance.

“I need to know you’re still present, Will. And how you’re feeling,” Lecter says, as he takes Will’s left hand and gently lowers it into the bowl. Blood slips through the water in little crimson blooms. Both the touch and the sound of Lecter’s voice call Will back into his body. “As soon as I’m through here, I’m happy to pay for a hansom to see you home safely.”

It takes a moment for Will to process. Lecter’s offer is the reasonable option, he thinks as he watches his blood in the water. But the thought of being back in his house, alone, like nothing happened, feels horrifically unmooring. He doesn’t know if he’ll make it through the night.

Maybe he’ll just end up back here, on sleepwalking feet.

His hand flexes in the water.

“I don’t… want to go yet,” Will manages after a minute’s thought.

His face burns. Lecter offered because he wants him gone, wants his home to himself; that much is obvious, but Will is too weak to give it to him.

“I feel lost,” he adds, so quietly it’s barely a whisper.

“Then you’re welcome to stay,” Lecter says, without hesitation, taking a folded bit of bandage and carefully scrubbing away at the cuts. He lifts Will’s hand onto a towel from the bag, and pats it dry. “I have a guest room.”

He winds bandages over Will’s raw knuckles, painstaking and gentle. Around and around.

“It’s natural to feel adrift. Your world has changed significantly. Likely irrevocably.”

He isn’t being pushed away. Will’s shoulders relax.

In the morning, this generosity will probably terrify him. But for now it helps.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, flexing his fingers in Lecter’s careful, methodical grip. “I thought —I thought I knew the worst of what would happen to me. This is so far from what I imagined.”

Lecter lowers Will’s other hand into the water, giving him a small nod in acknowledgement of the thanks.

“We can rarely imagine the worst things that will happen to us. We can only measure them by the last terrible events in our lives, and that depth is rarely sufficient. New horrors don’t always carve out a deeper bottom to the chasm in a straight line.”

Will hesitates for a moment, then looks up at the physician. “You should probably lock me in. Hopefully I'll sleep like the dead, but there’s a chance I’ll—sleepwalk again.”

“The back bedroom on the second floor, then,” he says and dries off Will’s knuckles. “I would be remiss not to offer you sleeping clothes, but I’m afraid I don’t have any set aside specifically for guests.”

“I can manage,” Will says, even as he momentarily sees himself in borrowed clothing of Lecter’s.

Which is a wildly and uncommonly intimate thought. He shoves it aside, along with the memory of their kiss. Perhaps they should talk about it, but Will isn’t sure he wants to, and Lecter doesn’t seem to need to.

“And if the door stays locked, it hardly matters what I wear to bed,” he says to cover up his wandering thoughts, managing a trembling smile.

“Hardly,” Lecter agrees with a smile of his own. He ties off the bandages and empties out the bowl in the basin next to their dinner dishes before returning to Will’s side, folding the stained towel neatly.

“Can I give you something for the pain?” he asks. “Or can I show you to your room?”

“Barely hurts,” Will says, though he knows that’s probably due to the shock he’s still floating in. “Sleep sounds good.”

Will eases off the stool. His legs are steadier this time, but he is heavy. The way up to Lecter’s guest room is slow and halting, as his mind and body both drag toward a halt.

When his head hits his pillow, he’s asleep in seconds.

That night, Hannibal dreams of teeth.

Sewage stains him dark and wet up to his kneecaps but he keeps plunging his hands down, deeper, scraping up handfuls of silt and filth. He cleans it off the broad flat of incisors, sharp barrels of canines, tulip buds of molars, tiny chips of milk teeth that stream through his fingers too fast to catch.

None of them are right.

He crushes them in his shaking fist. His palms bloom open under enamel and sharpened root. Thin rivulets of red cut down to his elbows.

He thrusts his bleeding hands back into the muck. It stings in all his ribbon cuts, slips past layers of epidermis to sink deep into his bloodstream. He can’t feel the slow thud of his heart anymore, all silence inside and out. He doesn’t speak here, perhaps doesn’t even think. All he can do is wish or pray.

Let me see her again.

His fingers catch. Hannibal shoves the filth away, and he can see the bottom before it all slowly trickles back into place. His nails dig into the thin pinkish connective tissue of a patch of scalp. A tangle of dirty blond hair trails off it, deciduous teeth knotted in the fine strands like a string of pearls.

Hannibal tries to pull back but a hand claws up from the bottom or from nowhere and drags him under.

He doesn't make a sound.

Will dreams of empty space.

A great, off-black void stretches in every direction, and he is a part of it. A faint shadow of an original that no longer exists. It's unsettling, but he doesn't panic. Because, somewhere, there *is* something else. A splotch of light. Of color. Of sound, singing to him across the blankness.

He moves toward it. The world assembles itself as he moves, gaining coherence because he is there to cohere around. When at last he reaches that little corona of light, somebody else is already there. Not a consequence of Will's approach, but *real* .

It's Lecter. Will feels relief and irritation at once. After all, who else would it be, invading his dreams? But Lecter is not pristine and controlled. No, he's soaked in filth and bleeding and desperate. Will takes another step forward, entranced at the sight.

The filth swallows Lecter whole.

Will dives into the mire after him.

But the filth isn't filth when he hits it. It's icy water. He plunges into it, swallowed by darkness. It fills his lungs. It devours his screams.

If he lets go, he'll wake up. He knows that. But that doesn't stop the terror, and it doesn't stop his struggle.

His hands collide with a sheet of ice, thick and so cold it burns. He scrabbles at it, nails catching and tearing. He stares up through its murky surface, some pale moonlight spilling in, just enough for him to make out a shape. His reflection, shadowy.

A shell he can step into, ready-made and waiting.

A blink, and he is out of the water. He watches his body drown beneath the ice, watches as it slows and stops kicking, as it begins to sink.

Then the frigid night is broken by a crack, wet and meaty, and Will turns.

Behind him, some ways off, Lecter kneels in the snow, holding an antler. His hair is matted with blood. Blood, like the antler came from him.

Will remembers the raven-feathered stag, his impalement and his marking. He hesitates, but only for a breath, because Lecter is naked in the snow. Will is too. They need to reach each other.

Will runs.

From this distance, he can just barely see as Lecter drops the antler and shoves a hand through the snow. He raises unsteadily onto his knees. Antlers form a broken circle in front of him. Then Will is close enough to count them, but they are innumerable. A great ocean of bloody tines.

Lecter lifts his head.

“Will?” His voice is a deep and painful rasp.

“Hannibal,” Will says, without thinking, without flinching at the intimacy of it. He’s shivering, hard, and the other man must be, too. He draws close, holds out a hand.

He’s dreaming, he knows that, but—

“We need to get inside,” he breathes. “Or burrow down deep. It’s too cold.”

And then he’s curling both his arms around Hannibal, hands going to his hair, hovering over the bloody wounds where the antlers once grew.

“Does it hurt?” he breathes as his fingers brush over the places where bits of skull are busy knitting themselves back together.

At the touch, Hannibal snarls and shoves Will back into the snow. He pins wrists with one crushing hand. His teeth scrape over Will’s ribs down to the quick rise of his belly.

He bites.

Will’s eyes go wide, but all he can see is the night sky above him as he’s torn apart. The dig of teeth into the tender flesh of his belly makes him howl, and he writhes, but not to get away.

The pain is indistinguishable from pleasure, even as he feels his organs tear.

His blood pumps out over them both, thick and hot and steaming in the winter air, and Will is — Will is—

Jerking awake in an unfamiliar bed, drenched in sweat and achingly hard.

His lungs heave as he stumbles out of the bed, staggering to the window, because the door is locked. He remembers that only in how he feels *trapped* . He fumbles at the latch then pushes the window open, cool air spilling over his brow.

It helps. It reminds him that he’s awake, that he’s in Dr. Lecter’s guest room. His busted knuckles hurt, and that helps too; it’s cold here, and there is pain, but there’s no pit of filth or snow-bleak landscape.

And yet it felt so vivid that Will can’t untangle himself fully.

It’s a long time before he is able to coax himself back to the bed, and longer still until he sleeps once more, now dreamless.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

"Seeing isn't how I'd describe the experience," he says. "Or at least, not the second time. But the first time, it was you, alone, digging through filth, and then bleeding in the snow. I tried to help."

“You did,” Lecter agrees. “Why?”

"Because you were in pain and freezing to death. Dream logic is simple.”

Will tilts his head, curious even as his heart begins to race.

"Why did you eat me?"

--

Will and Hannibal keep sharing dreams. Will stops sleeping. Hannibal makes a picnic dinner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal rises with the sun, shards of a half-remembered dream floating at the front of his mind.

He hasn’t dreamed in years— *more likely he simply hasn’t remembered them, any recollections dissolving like mist in the rising run; his sleep is largely easy.* This morning he collects the pieces, tries to work them into a sensible narrative. All he knows is that he had been looking for something in the dark and then it turned cold, so cold, but his mouth had been hot, running with blood.

He washes, dresses, turns the dream over. Finds holes, pieces worn away.

Hannibal can hear Will’s voice whisper his name. He focuses on it long enough that it softens, turns to music under his attention.

By the time he quietly unlocks Will’s door and finishes cleaning up from last night’s dinner, he’s put the dream in a corner of his mind to think on later. He plates breakfast for two: haddock and eggs with thick hollandaise, bacon, bread leftover from yesterday’s bake toasted and cut into pleasing triangles. He’s in the middle of preparing coffee when Will enters the kitchen.

His color has improved, the sleepless bruises under his eyes less pronounced than the day before. Hannibal keeps his expression pleasant and neutral— *practiced, simple* —but the dreamed sensation of Will's bare skin pressed close to him lazily floats to the surface.

Will, by contrast, looks uncertain, and liable to flee. His throat works. He looks anywhere but at Hannibal, gaze settling on his spectacles, forgotten the night before and now set neatly on the island.

He seizes them and slides the lenses back onto his face. Armor.

— back to some kind of equilibrium then —

"Good morning," Will says at last, voice rough. Before Hannibal can return the greeting, he forges ahead, "I imagine you must return to your patients today—I'll, ah, get out of your hair. Feeling better now and all."

"My first patient isn't expecting me for another hour," Hannibal tells him. "I would be a terrible host to turn you away without breakfast. I'd like to check your hands as well, if you'd be amenable."

— he's already set a place for Will in the dining room and those bandages should be changed at least once —

Will does lift his gaze then, but only to look around at the kitchen and the nearly-finished breakfast. He eases himself onto his stool from the night before. "I—if you're sure."

"I'm sure," Hannibal reassures him and nips into the larder for the butter dish.

He returns to find Will looking thoughtful and tense like he wants to say something, mouth flattening and tipping down at the corners as he seems to think better of it.

Finally, Will says, "I wanted to apologize for last night. Things—got out of hand."

At that, Hannibal momentarily falters. It's not that he hasn't been expecting an apology in some form or another, but it's vague. Purposely so.

— what does Will Graham feel got out of hand? the ill-advised experiment? the honest unfettered violence? the dead double? kissing him? —

He hopes it isn't the last one. Hannibal rather enjoyed that kiss, circumstances aside.

— a selfish thought; there had been a small part of him that had wanted to kiss Will Graham from the moment the man had pinned him to the ground and touched his Mark like it was something fragile —

There are too many ways Hannibal can accept Will's apology. It feels like a trap.

In the end, he settles on, "The Marks are as unpredictable as the mathematics of human behavior. Too many ugly variables. I was hardly expecting everything to go smoothly."

Will winces. Inside, Hannibal withers.

— the trap snaps shut —

Apparently, despite seeing it clearly, he managed to walk himself right into it.

Hannibal feels the walls going up around the soft parts of Will Graham, mortar and stone and distance— *he's spent so much time building walls, too, and some part of him wants to see if Will is clever enough to climb over them.* He nods to the plate and cup of coffee nearest to Will. "In the dining room, if you would."

Will accepts the redirection for what it is, and retreats with his dishes. Hannibal brings in the rest of their breakfast as Will takes his place from the previous night. Will's mind is clearly still working, and Hannibal allows his thoughts space to assemble, fetching cream and sugar.

"I do owe you some thanks. You have at least succeeded in redefining it for me as a natural, though rare, experience. It's less of a bogeyman now, more…conceivably manageable," Will says when he returns, with one of those tight smiles that puts forth a valiant effort to not look so despondent— *and never quite succeeds* . "Though perhaps not yet. Less doomed to failure, more suffering from an illness that's uniquely difficult to navigate."

— perhaps Will is interested in climbing walls, just not this particular morning; the only way to find out is to make sure that Will can come back; that Will wants to come back —

Before Will can reach for anything, Hannibal comes to his side and takes his hand. He pulls it up just high enough so he can see the state of the bandages— *fine, barely frayed, hardly worried to cotton filaments* —and lets several of his fingers slip between Will's.

His Mark hums with a soft wave of power.

"It's one of the rarest experiences," Hannibal says quietly. "If this is to be your illness, it's far better to navigate it with a doctor who understands the symptoms. I said yesterday that Jack Crawford has stranded you upriver without a way out. Let me be your paddle, Will."

He waits. Will's fingers flex in his grip, but don't pull away.

After a moment, Will asks, "What do you have in mind? From here on out."

"A standing appointment," Hannibal suggests. "I have space on my roster."

— even if he didn't, he would clear one; he turns the tone of Will's question over, that little hitch of breath before his question —

Hannibal brushes his thumb over one of Will's knuckles. The touch of Will's skin still makes the Mark pull at him, but he ignores it— *he also ignores the impulse to bring Will's hand to his mouth, to press lips to the rough of Will's fingertips.*

"Eat your breakfast," he says and gently sets Will's hand back on the table. He takes his own seat and adds a splash of cream to his coffee. "I don't know your schedule, but my rounds end at five in the evening. When and how often should I come by?"

Will doesn't answer immediately. It even takes him a few moments to move, to start adjusting his coffee to his taste.

"Right now, of course, I have no schedule. When I go back to Crawford, things will become…unpredictable. I often have no warning before following him to some far-flung district, and I never know how long I'll be gone," Will answers after a sip of his coffee. He takes another, longer one, eyes slipping shut. Some of the tension quietly slips from his shoulders.

At the sight, Hannibal makes a note to send some coffee home with him.

"Do you still plan to order ten days of bedrest, now that you know the cause of my disorder?"

"I plan to tell Jack that I've confirmed you're ill and that you're at risk of infecting others until you've recovered," Hannibal says after a bite of egg and haddock. "However long my recommended bedrest ends up being is up to you. We can work with the unpredictability when it arises. As for now, I'd like to see you every three days."

"That works," Will says, setting aside his coffee and starting in on breakfast— *managing not to fall on it as if starving, but only just* . "And if—something happens, and I need—" he breaks off, chews, and swallows hard. "If I need your opinion before that?"

"I have a post box I check several times during my rounds. Feel free to write if it's an opinion you need." Hannibal pauses to watch— *and watching Will eat has lost none of its shine* ; *even if he has to carry crockery all the way down to the water districts, he is going to feed Will Graham every chance he gets.* "Though it may take me some time to reach you on the south side, I will come if you ask me to."

Will nods, mostly down at his own plate, but it's relieved. He looks up at Hannibal, exhausted but perhaps somewhat settled, and his mouth quirks. It's almost a smile.

— he'll take it —

"Good," Will says. "That sounds good."

Will is sent off with coffee beans, fresh bandages, and instructions from Lecter to balance rest with exploration of his abilities. Controlling where and how his doubles manifest seems more within his grasp now, but that provides its own concerns.

Still, he has three days to sort it out—and three days to let his newfound obsession with Lecter's hands and lips die out. He'd been doing so well, right up until Lecter had taken his hand before breakfast, and then he'd been consumed again, just as he had been after that kiss. And if he lets his guard down too much, he can remember the dreamlike sensation of teeth on his skin—

They definitely need some time apart, or Will is only going to embarrass himself more.

He stops at home, to shave and wash and change, and then heads out into the city, busying himself restocking his pantry. He walks everywhere in an attempt to clear his head; in the end, he winds up distracted until nightfall.

And then he's on his own again.

He ignores the Mark. He tries to lose himself in books, then fly tying, and it almost works. But he keeps wondering what Lecter would think of this or that, wondering what the man is having for dinner, wondering—

He pours himself some whiskey. That helps.

Then, at last, he beds down, and he is tired enough that he falls right asleep.

And opens his eyes to Lecter's body spread out beneath him.

His hands are around Lecter's bared throat, the Mark shining beneath his fingers. No cravat. No fabric between them. *Perfect* .

Lecter's legs jerk, a reflex, not any real attempt to fight. He doesn't claw at Will or try to pry his grip loose. Instead his hand lifts, unsteady, to brush a curl out of Will's eyes. The tenderness is searing.

Will squeezes harder, arms and bare chest tightening with effort as he leans into it.

The hand slips limp off Will's forehead. Lecter's life stutters out of him, eyes rolling back into his skull, lips parting around a broken gasp, and it is ecstasy. Will lowers his head as if to drink down Lecter's last threads of breath.

His lips are still warm, but won't be for much longer. And that is beautiful too, but so unfair.

Will's grip eases, only a little, only enough to keep Lecter alive. He rocks his hips down as he breathes air into Lecter's lungs, connects their lives together.

A moment stretches between them, suspended. And then Lecter seizes a handful of Will's curls and drags him down, closer. His teeth split Will's bottom lip, the taste of blood overwhelming. His nails score into Will's flesh.

Will makes a noise somewhere between a whine and a moan in the sudden face of Lecter's dominance. It's an undeniable response, everything he has wished for the man to give him since their first stolen kiss, and the pain makes it feel so real.

But then he hears the wet snap of skin splitting. He pulls back, though he's not allowed to go far—just enough to see the antlers that branch out from Lecter's skull. They drip with blood and thick, inky ichor.

Distantly, he thinks, *you're dreaming.* And then, *this is not your dream*. Or, it could be, but it could also not be, and if it's not—

Will tries to jerk away, even as his body demands that he press closer, give in, let himself be consumed. But Lecter gets a hand around Will's thigh and rolls them, never breaking Will's grip on his throat.

Will can't stop him.

He also can't stop the way he arches up and gives himself over. He feels empty, so empty, but just on the verge of being poured into. His hands spasm on Lecter's throat, thumbs brushing once more over the Mark.

Lecter slows, takes, explores Will's mouth with his tongue as if trying to memorize the taste of him. He presses his thigh between Will's legs and drags a hand down to thumb at the button of his trousers.

If Will's dreaming, he doesn't want to wake up. He feels half-real, his desires borrowed, spilling out from Lecter's hands and teeth, though they are welcome in the darkness at the core of him. Except maybe it isn't him dreaming, maybe it's Lecter constructing this, and if that's the case—

He has no real evidence but—

Will ruts against Lecter's thigh, insistent, desperate, and simultaneously calls on his Mark with a thundering thought of

WAKE UP

And he doesn't know which one of them he's addressing, but he shoves with his power all the same.

The force comes from outside, from everywhere, an echo, a reverberation that sounds like words but feels like a shove to the chest, hard enough to break ribs.

And Hannibal wakes up.

Outside the window, it's still dark, not even a tinge of lighter blue in the sky, and nothing more than the stir of carriages and a few passersby break the quiet. Nothing loud enough to startle him so violently from sleep. Hannibal drags his fingers over the Mark and feels the ghost of the power lying in wait beneath his skin. Two dreams, Will Graham appearing in both of them— *less appearing and more starring in this most recent one if his already-fading memories are to be believed.*

Two nights in a row. Two is enough for suspicion.

More than that, he's hard.

Hannibal gets up long enough to take care of himself, clean up, and settle back in bed— *always practiced at clearing his head.* He walks through the halls of his memory to gilded rooms of things that lull him, and sits in a vaulted, golden chapel until he drifts back to sleep.

Will doesn't go back to sleep until morning.

He's too concerned by what feels like proof of a suspicion he's had for a few weeks now: that the Mark has changed his dreams, once more broken down some boundary between his mind and others'.

Unlike the previous night, he's entirely unsuccessful at ignoring his erection.

(*That* he takes care of as perfunctorily as possible, but he can't forget the dream. Either dream. He comes refusing to shout Lecter's name.)

It's only when the sun is up and Lecter is no doubt on his rounds that Will finally collapses into bed. His dreams, when they come, are the usual sort. Waking, when it comes, finds him standing in front of the door, hands on the lock that is still set.

For now.

He's going to have to talk to Lecter about this, but the idea is mortifying. The best and worst case scenario are the same: that Lecter remembers that dream (either dream), remembers being forced out of it. It would save him a lot of convincing, but would make it undeniable that they'd both experienced…

Something out of Lecter's brain, Will realizes as he's feeding himself dry toast, standing at the kitchen counter. *Lecter* had been in charge of that dream. Will had joined in media res and been swept up in it.

It feels impossible but he can't argue his way out of it, and he collapses into a chair and covers his face with his hands.

oOo

Will becomes nocturnal.

It's easier than he expects. It's early days (so to speak) and he is still filled with so much anxiety in the dark of the night that it's only natural to stay awake. Before he sleeps each morning, though, he feels a spike of guilt that he is not attempting to understand this new aspect of the Mark.

Then again, he hasn't really tried to understand any of it.

One night, he does get as far as conjuring up a double. He leaves it standing motionless, not enkindled with any particular killer's mind. It's gratifying to know that he can form a blank copy, something unthreatening and malleable, right up until he considers that he's only embodied his own mind—unpatterned in an idle state, but full of violent potential. Then the panic starts, and he stares at his double, searching for any difference, any shred of divergence from himself.

He finds nothing, of course, just like there was no real difference in the one he beat to death in Lecter's drawing room, just like there was *absolutely* no difference in the one he let drown in Lecter's dream.

He lets the double fall apart to shadow after that, and makes himself a bracing cup of coffee.

oOo

On the third day after his meeting with Lecter, Will has only been awake for a few hours when the knock comes. He's been expecting it, of course. He's cleaned up again, both himself and the house.

He still has no idea what he's going to say.

He goes to the door anyway. Opens it and steps back with a tight smile.

"Doctor."

"Good evening, Will." Lecter smiles back—it looks almost fond. He's holding a basket. "I brought supper along, if you'd see fit to join me."

Will is caught between wanting to shut the door and walk away, and to grab the man by the cravat and haul him inside, longing for answers and some release from the humiliating purgatory he's found himself in.

He does neither, but he does step out of the way and gesture Lecter inside.

"I'm afraid I haven't managed much," he says, desperate for something to say. "Intentionally, at any rate."

(Will *has* to talk to him about it. That doesn't make it comfortable. But it's so insistent he can't keep his mouth shut.)

"Progress isn't always linear and sometimes has the good fortune to be unintentional," Lecter says. "Something specific on your mind?"

Yes.

But the words don't come. Will shuts the door and takes off down the hall. Food. Lecter brought food. He eats in the kitchen, so to the kitchen he goes.

He turns over options in his mind the whole short way. Asking directly would be most expedient only if what he fears is true. Otherwise...

"The character of my dreams has changed," he says. "Not—all of them, but some. Since the Mark appeared, and more so lately."

Will says this all to the darkening glass of the windows that look out over the garden. Behind him, the indistinct reflection of Lecter inclines his head, as if in curiosity. But before Lecter says anything, he sets his basket on the table and unpacks it quickly. He's brought plates.

Of course he has. They look fragile.

“I take it you’re not referring to your sleepwalking,” Lecter says at last, carefully spooning something Will can’t make out from this angle onto their plates.

"No," he says, smiling briefly as he tips his head back, blinks at the ceiling. "Though *dream* walking...might not be an inaccurate term, if what I suspect is happening is accurate."

His throat tightens. He remembers his hands around Lecter's neck, squeezing, *squeezing*.

"I think," he says, voice now so soft it's barely above a whisper, "that sometimes I go wandering, into other people's dreams."

Into yours.

At that, Lecter stops moving. No more sounds of industrious bustling.

“How certain are you that these dreams don’t belong to you?” he asks.

"More certain than not. There's a feeling of being—an intruder. Or of being overtaken by a narrative. Neither of those feelings is familiar."

He rolls his next question on his tongue, then turns to face Lecter, arms crossed over his chest, half-hugging himself.

"Do you remember your dreams at all?" His tone is far from accusatory; it's more *coaxing*, as if trying to draw a skittish animal closer. "Since we met?"

He wonders if Lecter will lie. Or if there's nothing to lie about, and he's simply going mad. But he remembers the Mark in that second dream, using its power to break the connection that he is certain was there.

Don't lie to me, he pleads silently.

“I’m not prone to nightmares or dreams,” Lecter says and it’s quiet, honest. His gaze flicks away, tongue running over his bottom lip before he returns to look at Will again. “But that seems to have changed.”

A pause. Will’s expression shutters as he prepares himself to be dismissed. Then, quietly:

“How much did you see?”

Will's grip on himself loosens, one arm falling back to his side. His gaze drifts to the table. What he can now see are blood red beets, carefully arranged on each fine plate. There’s some kind of pie, as well. That familiar sardonic smile twists his lips; it's the only armor he has.

"*Seeing* isn't how I'd describe the experience," he says. "Or at least, not the second time. But the first time, it was you, alone, digging through filth, and then bleeding in the snow. I tried to help."

Lecter leaves the table. Approaches step by inexorable step, slow but purposeful. Will can feel the weight of his gaze.

“You did,” Lecter agrees. “Why?”

Will’s lips twitch. His hand looses its death grip on his waist and he returns Lecter’s gaze at last. "Because you were in pain and freezing to death. Dream logic is simple.”

He tilts his head, curious even as his heart begins to race.

"Why did you eat me?"

— because it had been a dream born from a memory —

— because in that memory, he hadn’t know if the cold or starvation would kill him first —

— because even though he’d promised himself he’d save his next taste of human flesh for the men who slaughtered his sister and made him betray himself, Will had been there —

— because he wanted, wants *, to taste Will again and that had been the easiest way to do it —*

“Dream logic is simple,” Hannibal repeats, letting his feet carry him the rest of the distance. Will doesn’t shy away. “Because I was hungry.”

He takes Will’s face between his hands and kisses him.

And Will kisses him back.

He pushes up against Hannibal immediately, one hand on his waist and the other finding his neck and tugging him closer. Hannibal slides his fingers into Will’s dreadfully soft curls— *he’d touched the baby-fine edges of the ones at his neck before, but it’s different in the thick of them* —and kisses him deeper, scratches nails lightly against his scalp.

He draws back, but only just enough to speak, loath to let Will’s hands leave his side or neck where the touch of Will’s fingers spear a direct, charged line to his Mark— *if Will pulled hard enough would he drop to his knees?*

“That may have been impulsive,” Hannibal breathes.

“May have been?” Will huffs a laugh but he does falter, if only for a heartbeat, eyes flicking to Hannibal’s mouth, then back up again. “Should I take that to mean you're regretting this?"

Hannibal leans his forehead against Will’s and murmurs, “With every choice lies the possibility of regret. However, if I choose to do something, it's usually for a good reason.”

Will’s mouth is red, softening to pink, so he steals another kiss. Quick but far less gentle.

"Most people," Will says after pulling away, slowly, as if re-gathering his thoughts, "would have been horrified to learn somebody else was playing voyeur in their subconscious."

— there is something about the violation that thrills him, that Will could inflict his intentions without even having to touch him —

“I am not most people,” he says and it feels like a diplomatic answer. “I'm...metabolizing the experience. I don’t begrudge you any actions you can’t control, even if I never agreed to be on the receiving end of them.”

Hannibal slides a hand back to Will’s jaw, smooths his thumb back and forth. “I’m supposed to be your paddle.”

— he shouldn’t kiss Will again; he wants to —

Will chooses for him, even as he chews at his bottom lip, and slowly disentangles himself from Hannibal, taking in a deep, steadying breath. "It—helps to have this in the open. The dreams. Instead of not knowing where we stand. From that perspective, it's stabilizing. But you can hardly be an objective observer and guide like this."

Hannibal takes a small step back, for space, for Will to collect himself— *he should look away, allow Will the grace of not being seen, of privacy and coping with the taste of him left behind.*

He doesn’t. He watches, savors.

“I never intended to be objective,” Hannibal says. Hardly an admission; simply a fact. “I wanted to offer you what I’ve learned and time where you don’t have to hide. I wanted to guide you through learning your power and control, if I could. I am upriver with you, and I want to help you get to shore however I can. That said, these are your sessions, Will. If it’s objectivity you desire and you wish me to leave, I will. If you want to continue but need to reinstate some professional distance, I will.”

— he doesn’t need any of that to steadily tiptoe his way into the vaults of Will’s heart and mind to coax out whatever waits there; all he needs is time —

To his slight surprise, Will groans in frustration and runs a hand through his hair.

"I don't—I don't *wish you to leave* , Hannibal. And whatever *professional distance* means in this case, I don’t want that either. I can't claim to understand what's between us, but..." His throat works and he looks lost, moving around Hannibal to drop into one of the kitchen chairs. "If objectivity isn't the goal, then we have fewer rules to cling to, I suppose."

The distance Will puts between them is understandable, logical— *only a little disappointing, though he knows they were hardly going to do something reckless.* Hannibal follows Will back to the table.

“Fewer but not none.” He thumbs the button open on his jacket and takes the other seat. “It’s healthy to establish boundaries. Which I am open to.”

Will keeps his gaze fixed elsewhere when he notes, "For what it's worth, when I realized what was happening, with your dreams, I made sure to only sleep when I knew you were on

your rounds. Seemed—polite."

“It was,” Hannibal agrees. “It is. But you can’t sleep during the day forever.”

“Guess I can’t.” Will goes quiet, then chances one more glance at him, brows pulled close. "Why did you kiss me, anyway? What about knowing I had experienced your dreams made you—so singularly focused?"

Hannibal doesn’t have an immediate answer to that— *no, he does have an immediate one, it’s just not the right one, not at this particular moment.* He links his fingers and rests them on the table for a long moment.

“You tried to save me. Even though we don’t know each other. Even though you knew it was a dream. And yet, you did it anyway.”

— it’s not a lie; it’s an impulse he finds fascinating because he isn’t sure that he would have had it himself; not that he particularly believes in unnecessary suffering —

Will considers the food in front of him, then stands and heads for the back counter. He pulls open a drawer. “It’s easy in a dream. The risks aren’t real. Only the emotions are.”

That comment slices through Hannibal sideways, a neat slip past the veil and into the core of him. He’s uncertain if Will has already followed that line of thinking to its natural conclusion *— that Will’s desire and all its forms live somewhere inside him; he may have dreamt the stage but Will had been the only actor there with any true awareness*.

He doesn’t remember much but he thinks of the heat of Will’s hips rolling against him, of shaking arms wrapped around him as if a naked body alone could shield him from the deadly cold.

“Dreams are the purview of the unconscious, basest fears, actions, and desires. Displaying an instinct towards selflessness and care is something that can hardly be dismissed simply because the risks were not real. Even given the rest of your waking actions that day.”

Will returns and sets cutlery by both of their plates, expression shuttering. “And which actions do you mean? When I attacked you based on a hunch? Or when I kissed you? When I murdered myself? All three? I’d already told you I was unstable.”

“You were surprising. You continue to surprise me. Short of the occasional accident or premature delivery, that is a rare occurrence in my life these days.” Hannibal can’t help but smile a little. He doesn’t understand the frustration— *Will Graham seems preoccupied with aspects of himself, a mirror that when turned on itself is only unhappy by what it sees; that kind of thinking is self-iterative, perpetuates assumptions.*

So, he tries to catch Will’s eyes and says, “The way you view your own stability is perhaps twisting your perception. In self-imposed seclusion, you may no longer recognize that others might be able to see you. That perhaps you’re not as unknowable as you think. Or as difficult.”

Will blinks, frozen. What Lecter— *Hannibal* , time to drop the act—is saying goes against not just his own self perception, but Crawford's and Bloom's concerns about him. It's like a sliver of light cast into a dark room. Shocking and transformative.

But perhaps not entirely real. Will knows himself. He knows he is unreliable, that he is dangerous. Except that's not what Hannibal is taking issue with, exactly.

Hannibal is only really arguing that *he* doesn't find it to be an issue. And that maybe Will shouldn't have assumed he would.

(It was a reasonable assumption. But this immediate faith Hannibal has in him is monumental. It pushes at his moribund self-loathing, just a little.)

He realizes he hasn't spoken in some time, and clears his throat, self consciously. He finally takes a bite of the food. Room temperature but no less delicious for it. His expression softens as he chews.

"So what boundaries should we set, to account for my *ability to surprise you*?"

Across from him, Hannibal takes a bite of pie, savors, then says, "Why don't we start with touch."

"Touch," he repeats, uncertainly.

Hannibal inclines his head. "We can't go back and alter lines that have already been crossed, but it's important to know what you're comfortable with going forward."

Will's mind flashes to his hands around Hannibal's throat, their bodies arching and grinding together. His cheeks stain slightly. He eats another beet.

"I don't know what I'm comfortable with," he says, finally. "Or uncomfortable with." *I don't trust myself to know*, he adds silently. "Perhaps you should start."

"Then it's best to begin at some distance, I think," Hannibal says. "I'll touch you in our sessions, but only to guide. Or subdue a double, if it comes to it."

Limiting touch is reasonable. Slowing down this...whatever it is. But it stings. The conversation—the day—the *week* —has left him raw.

"So no more of," Will says, and gestures to the spot by the window where they'd just done quite a bit of touching, "that?"

He keeps his voice as even as he can manage. He doesn't want to sound *hurt*. But he needs clarity, this time, before he makes a fool out of himself.

Hannibal must hear the hurt anyway. His voice is knowing when he asks, "Would you like me to kiss you again, Will?"

Will buries his face in his hands, fighting a hysterical laugh.

“Yes,” he manages. “I thought that was pretty obvious.” Will considers another moment in that shaded darkness, then adds, “It helps me know I’m not just imagining it, this…thing between us. And you enjoy it.”

The last is said as he lifts his head just enough to see past his fingers. It’s accusatory. Playful, almost.

And Hannibal is there, kneeling at his feet. Will could have sworn he never heard Hannibal leave his chair.

He gently lifts Will’s fingers away from his face completely. Hannibal presses the jut of Will’s thumb to his mouth before letting it slowly drop, reaching up, and tugging Will’s lips to his.

Will chases Hannibal’s mouth without hesitation, sliding out of his own seat and practically into the other man’s lap. Hannibal’s hands trail down his sides, grip his hips, and pull him the rest of the way there. Will’s Mark gives a pleased thrum, and he reaches up to tug gently at Hannibal’s cravat.

The morass of his assumptions and fears and hopes resolves into one conclusion: Hannibal is very easy to entice when Will dangles something he wants in front of him.

Like this: as Will fumbles with the cravat, Hannibal lifts a hand away from Will’s hips to help tug the fabric free and the top several buttons of his shirt open. Then he flattens that hand against Will’s chest, presses down as if to feel the Mark humming beneath Will’s shirt.

It’s like a spark meeting gunpowder. Sensation rips through Will, and his lips part on a rough gasp, fingers sliding around Hannibal’s throat.

Hannibal hisses in a sharp breath in response. His teeth scrape the bony juncture between Will’s jaw and ear, followed by a warm swipe of tongue. Will’s hand tangles tight in Hannibal’s hair when Hannibal sets to sucking a purpling bruise into his skin.

“Tell me you enjoy this,” Will groans, rocking his hips down. “Tell me you want this. That you don’t *want* to only ever touch me during—lessons.”

“That wasn’t what I said,” Hannibal says low against his throat, just above his collar. “I told you how I’d touch you in our sessions, not that those would be the only touches you’d receive.”

He drags both hands back to Will’s hips, steadying, and meets his movements halfway with a low groan. “Would you describe this as a session, Will?”

“You’re absolutely *insufferable*,” Will mutters, but it loses some of its edge when he moans, loud and full.

Hannibal grabs Will’s wrist and presses those fingers harder against his throat. Will tightens his grip obediently.

“You wanted me to choke you in your dream, too,” he sighs.

“Did I?” Hannibal’s voice is rough under Will’s tightening fingers. “It seems you remember far more than I do. I only have pieces now. Images. Light and air and color.”

“I remember all of it,” Will says. “Tried to forget it, to be *polite*. Don’t want to now.”

Hannibal surges his way back to Will’s mouth, leaning into that tightening grip. He kneads Will’s lip in his teeth but not hard enough to bleed.

It’s perfect, all sharp edges and tension and a blissful violence.

But slowly, he releases his bruising grip on Will’s hip, smoothing that hand up Will’s body to cup the back of his neck and stroke the downy curls there. The movement of his hips gentles, and Will can’t stop an undignified whine from leaking out of his chest.

Hannibal says, “We should talk about your dream-walking. I have to sleep tonight.”

Will struggles to breathe normally, to think in complete sentences again. He wants nothing more than to *take*, but Hannibal did come by for a reason. It wasn’t this. He pulls back enough to see the other man’s face, lips kiss-swollen, hair disheveled.

Hannibal’s eyes glitter as he murmurs conspiratorially, “And I think I’d like to lay you out somewhere other than the kitchen.”

“I do own a bed,” Will says, with an unsteady but hopeful grin. “And I only just woke up. You’d be safe for tonight, at the very least.” For all Hannibal’s teasing, though, the man looks determined now. Serious. “But we can talk.”

It is a concession he doesn’t want to make, but he manages. He even pulls himself up to his feet, though his trousers are uncomfortably tight.

Hannibal lets Will stand unsteadily and tries not to follow his movements too closely— *or rather tries not to look too openly, and keeps his smugness from creeping onto his mouth; he’s hardly unaffected.* After taking a moment to compose himself, he also returns to his seat. Will is all mussed curls and rumpled collar, lips still slightly parted and bruise already going dark and vibrant red at the corner of his jaw, heat and hunger in his gaze.

“Tell me how it first started,” Hannibal says finally, hoarse. He touches his throat and still-scalding Mark— *a prayer for bruises* —and adds, “And I could take a drink, please, if you have one.”

Will finally tears his gaze away. “I have one. I restocked the pantry.”

As he gets up and heads into the kitchen proper, he says, “It started just before I secluded myself, though I was unsure if it was real until…I suppose half an hour ago. In hindsight, I’m fairly sure it first happened with one Dr. Frederick Chilton.”

Hannibal nods. “I’m familiar with Dr. Chilton.”

“My condolences,” Will says. “He consults for Crawford, occasionally. He’s arrogant and cowardly. Claimed he’d caught the Ripper all on his own—and then it turned out his therapy just unintentionally convinced one of his patients to take credit for the Ripper’s crimes. So thoroughly that it drove the man to murder one of the nurses. Anyway, despite *all* of *that*, Crawford called him in again a few weeks ago. That night I had the oddest dream involving…large, flightless birds. And him, sitting in the middle of it all. I didn’t interact with any of it. Mostly I waited for it to be over.”

— Frederick Chilton, what a dreadfully dull mind that man must have; he makes a note to read up on flightless birds, if only to unsettle the doctor next time they see each other; perhaps reason enough to host the man for dinner —

“Dr. Chilton is rather fond of the sound of his own voice,” Hannibal says. “And imagines himself to have quite the silver tongue. If he’s not careful, one day he might find himself parted with it.”

Will returns with two glasses of wine and resumes his seat, passing one to Hannibal, who takes a sip. It’s a basic claret, a far cry from the red he’d served to Will, leagues away from what he keeps stocked in his own personal cellars— *most find his discerning palate aspirational, a sign of culture and good breeding; he has the distinct feeling Will would find it unattractive.*

With a small flicker of surprise, Hannibal finds he cares about that.

He gives Will a nod of thanks— *he has preferences more than any kind of true snobbery; he has consumed far worse and appreciated far less, after all.*

Will relaxes visibly at that, and when he speaks again, it’s with less charming insouciance and more vulnerability. “The next time it happened, I dreamed of Dr. Alana Bloom. I was giving a lecture in an operating theater, of all things.”

“Have you ever been in one?” Hannibal asks— *curious, yes, how a profiler knows anything about operating theaters but equally as curious how Will knows Alana too; he wasn’t aware she did any consulting for Jack Crawford*.

Will nods. “Medical dissections, just as an observer. But in the dream, I was the one holding the knife. She was on the slab, awake but paralyzed. I fled. That one is—less certain, but it had the same strange vividness and lucidity. More than a dream, less than reality.”

“And were there any more?”

“One other. Crawford, that time; it involved him herding me into a cage, to be taken from case to case. It’s so obvious that I would assume it came only from my own mind, but his wife was there, too, and in an amount of detail I don’t think I’d ever considered. Accurate detail, too; I spoke with her the next day.”

“I’m quite familiar with Phyllis, though perhaps you could have reasoned that out yourself. Dr. Bloom and I are also close friends. A small world. It seems you and I were bound to cross

paths.” Hannibal takes a thoughtful sip of wine “You say there have been no others? Dreams with people you don’t recognize?”

"No, I don't think so," Will answers after a moment’s consideration. "But I also don't have a large sample size. It doesn't happen every night." He finally starts in on his pie, and hums idly at the taste. "I can't say what triggers it, though, except perhaps..."

He trails off, taking another bite and chewing as he thinks. Hannibal bites down on his own pleased smile that Will has returned to his meal with enjoyment— *even more pleased with his own foresight to prepare a meal enjoyable at any temperature*.

“Except?” he prompts. “The trick is in the details. What was different about those nights?”

“This is reconstruction—I don’t exactly keep a diary.” Will shrugs, half to himself. “But I think, each time, I feel asleep in…a state of longing. To understand, or to talk to again, to see again. Very specifically aimed at that person. But that sounds very convenient, doesn’t it?”

“Convenient? No.” Hannibal smiles at him over the rim of his glass. “It sounds like intention.”

— power craves direction, conscious or unconscious matters less than its simple existence —

“I’d like you to start taking notes, Will, before you fall asleep and when you wake up. Each time you wake up, if you can’t stay asleep. Keep track of your dreams and their subjects, any dream-walking or sleepwalking.”

Will nods, though he doesn’t look pleased at the idea. Given the apparent frequency of his nightmares, he likely would prefer not to revisit the details any more than necessary.

“And should I be trying to stay in my bed, or trying to…” His gaze flicks up for just a moment. “Visit people?”

His tongue peeks out from between his lips. Hannibal suspects it’s unconscious.

“Both. We have three nights between our next session: one for you to resume nocturnal sleep, one for testing your state of longing theory, and one for you to intentionally try to will yourself into a dream.” Hannibal gathers salad onto his fork and adds, “One of mine.”

Will considers him. “I wonder what you’ll be dreaming of,” he drawls, and Hannibal can hear the smile that doesn’t quite touch his mouth.

“I meant what I said, Will. I don’t often dream. I have no way of predicting if you’ll interrupt a scene more like the first or the second, let alone controlling it,” Hannibal says— *the thought of setting the stage for himself before shutting his eyes is intoxicating; but the dreamspace gives him little recourse to keep his own secrets from spilling out*.

Will ducks his head, his teeth catching on his lower lip as he reigns himself in once more. One of his hands splays against the wood of the table. His finger taps. “The first night of nocturnal sleep may have me wandering unintentionally, if I can manage it at all,” Will warns, finally.

“I also wasn’t going to recommend trying to sleep unaided this first night. If you take it shortly after I depart, ten drops of laudanum should allow you to sleep until dawn. I have some in my kit if you don’t have any on hand.”

"No, I don't have any on hand. That should take care of the dreaming tonight, certainly,” Will snorts, fingering his glass. Then, he looks back up at Hannibal, brow quirking. "Is this after or in place of you *laying me out*?"

Hannibal doesn’t acknowledge the quirked brow— *not out loud; something inside him, something that might be a portion of his staggering self-control, goes molten and liquid at that look.*

“In place of,” he answers smoothly, lifting his own glass. “I doubt you’d need it after.”

Will nearly chokes on his wine, red flushing the tops of his cheekbones. He sets his glass down and flattens a hand on his chest.

He manages a strangled, “Makes sense.”

“It isn’t just to help you sleep,” Hannibal continues, openly enjoying the blush and wondering what else he could turn that color if given time and persistence. “It should also work to keep your mind sedated. A dreamless state.”

"The laudanum does seem the better choice.” After another determined swallow, Will says, “I'll refrain from making bedrest jokes.”

Hannibal smiles, teeth and all. “Please, don’t hold back on my account.”

"No, it's definitely on mine," Will says with a playful glare, even as he blushes further.

Hannibal dips his head in a small nod. “Then I won’t insist.”

When the food is gone, he lets Will help him pack the dishes away and leaves him with the bottle of laudanum and instructions. When Will walks him to the door, Hannibal hesitates and considers kissing him again. Given the relative ease in the way Will holds himself, one hand braced on the doorframe and the other holding the door itself, Hannibal gets the impression that if he does, he likely won’t leave.

Instead, he reaches out and smooths the curls off Will’s forehead.

“Goodnight, Will,” Hannibal says and heads out into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Serindrana here! For the handful of you who are also Dishonored fans, I wanted to take a moment to mention something you've probably already realized - we really did just

steal the Mark (and a variant of the Abbey/the Outsider) for this story, instead of doing a true Dishonored AU.

But if we *had*, Hannibal would have moved to Dunwall as a young man from Serkonos, thanks to a post at the Academy of Natural Philosophy, and would now have his surgery on Clavering. He almost certainly would consult for the Regent. Will would probably have way more contact with cultists than is statistically likely, and would have wanted to be a whaler as a boy - but alas, his empathy would have made him lose his mind the first time they cut into a whale. Jack and Team Sassy Science would be part of the Watch, with some pointed oversight by the Abbey given the nature of the crimes they investigate.

If any of you want to take that and run with it, please do!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

When Hannibal checks his post box on his way back from his third patient of the day, he finds a rumpled letter bearing Jack Crawford's untidy scrawl:

A MEDICAL MYSTERY, DOCTOR. COME AT ONCE, EVEN IF INCONVENIENT, with an address at the bottom.

Hannibal tilts his head, reads the message again. A case, more than likely, but Jack hasn't asked him to consult at a scene since the body in the river—a body that had turned into a whole wheel of stitched-together corpses by the end of it all. He sends a runner to tell the rest of his roster that he will make their visits tomorrow and hails the nearest carriage.

--

The dream experiment bears fruit. Will and Hannibal are called out to a case. Will is dead.

Chapter Notes

(CW: This chapter gets deep into Will's delusions about his own death.)

The first night, Will takes the laudanum as instructed, though perhaps later into the evening than Hannibal intended. It puts him to sleep, sure enough: into a warm, fuzzy haze that makes him feel heavy and delighted at the soft rasp of his blanket against his cheek. He still wakes to sweat-soaked sheets, though, and that is as good a stay as any against developing a habit; clearly laudanum doesn't fix *everything*.

But it does prevent dreams.

The next day, Will catches up on the papers, the petty crimes and constant turning of the world beyond his shabby townhouse. By nightfall, he's lonely again, and, perhaps predictably, his mind turns to Hannibal. That, too, delays sleep. Hannibal is shockingly persistent, as if he's moved in and made himself a home inside of Will's skull. In the end, Will only manages to empty his mind by exercising until he is near falling down with exhaustion, a hard point to reach with his newfound endurance. But eventually, the pain in his legs clears

everything else away, leaving a sore and sated silence in its wake. When he finally sleeps, he finds only his own dreams.

They aren't pleasant. He murders himself over and over again, and each time takes more delight in it. He remembers only scraps when he wakes in between dreams, but jots it all down as best he can. The last is the worst: he's the victim, and watches his own face grin down at him as he's strangled.

It takes effort to stabilize himself the next day. Food is difficult to remember, and he has no work to get lost in (work is always a risk, but generally effective when he needs to get away from himself). When evening falls once more, Will is distracted and exhausted. Not suited to thinking of Hannibal, longingly or otherwise, which seems like a cruel joke. He can't even picture himself going to the man for comfort, because he's too prickly, too ready to attack.

He can always try again after his next session. Tell Hannibal he couldn't do it this time, but he'll try again. Except then he'd have to explain *why* it hadn't worked, and—

And he'd rather not.

So even though he doesn't want to, Will tries. Tries to think not of Hannibal comforting him, but of Hannibal *taking* from him, as he had in their shared dreams. He remembers the dream-feeling of Hannibal's teeth tearing into him, hears his voice saying *I was hungry*. That, finally, gets Will's attention, mind and body, and from there it's only a few shameful steps to shuddering in his bed, panting against his pillow as he works himself, wishing it was Hannibal arched above him, teeth in his neck. There's still a bruise there. He didn't notice it until the morning after, but it's livid still, and he pushes against it.

His Mark throbs. His hand moves faster, and he bites back a whine, then gives up on holding anything back. He comes crying Hannibal's name.

It's not enough. Will wants Hannibal *there*.

And that's how he falls asleep, frustrated and lonely.

The first night, Hannibal goes to sleep after methodically clearing his mind, in case Will's experiments fail. Will moving around in his head gives Hannibal little recourse to hide facets of himself, to maintain the veil of normality— *and acceptable eccentricity* —that gives him shape in the waking world. In the end, he wakes just as clear-headed, no lingering bits of dream at the forefront of his mind. Hopefully evidence of the laudanum working as intended on Will's end .

The next day, he only permits himself to think of Will— *the transcendent look that gripped Will's face when killing the double; the circlet of faint purple marks Will left on his throat* — between patients and letters and Jack Crawford angling for more information on his ill employee.

"I know you prescribed bedrest, Doctor," Jack had said, "but —"

Hannibal's pale brows had lifted at that. "There is no 'but', Jack. Dwelling on death is hardly good for a mind and body under duress."

"Dwelling on death isn't particularly good for any of us, but when I need him, I need him. Besides, it's his body fighting off an illness; all I need is his mind. Even affected, it's better than not having him around."

"No mind without the body," Hannibal had answered. A warning.

The last post box stop of the day brings summons for additions to his rounds, the latest medical journal, a flowery letter from Dr. Frederick Chilton to review a manuscript— *it's flattery, poorly disguised, angling for an invitation to dinner.* Later that evening, thinking of flightless birds and Will's disdain, he pens one all the same and pulls out two notebooks. One holds a number of recipes, carefully collected and curated, and the other a long list of the city's rude, high class and low and everyone in between.

He selects his name: a nurse from his hospitalist days who, along with several petty discourtesies, had attempted to frame him in order to cover up her own siphoning of the hospital's morphine— *after being discovered, she'd merely transferred to a smaller convalescent ward at the teaching hospital.* Hannibal spends the later hours of the evening surreptitiously gathering information on her whereabouts and nighttime activities. As he makes his way through back streets, he imagines dozens of possible scenes to leave for Will.

When he returns home, thinking about Will drives Hannibal to such distraction that he lies back on the sofa in the drawing room and sinks into a scene where he presses a naked Will into the carpet and swallows him down— *he wants to know what that man tastes like almost more than anything.* However, he makes sure he still goes to sleep thinking about nothing at all. And as expected, he dreams of nothing.

The third night, Hannibal goes to bed and conducts a small experiment of his own, a test of control. After all, these are his dreams. He settles in and closes his eyes, clearing his mind of everything but a room. An office, his office, when he used to keep a physical practice. He painstakingly builds every detail, the full bookcases and a wide desk and the scalpel he kept at the edge of it to sharpen his pencils. The examination table and the shelves full of instruments, tinctures, medicines. He holds it pointedly in the forefront of his mind— *a calm place; none of the memories here are revelatory or distressing* —until he drifts off to sleep.

And, at last, he dreams.

Hannibal crouches in the mud, the thundering of small rapids somewhere behind him. He can't remember the name of this place, a district upriver that he's only visited once. He looks down. A body lies at his feet, naked and curled in on itself, a row of torn wounds traversing the soft corner between ribs and iliac crest. Evidence of thick thread, large stitches, pulled free. Its smell burns his sinuses, a careful mixture of resin and formaldehyde, camphor and chamomile. Medical preservative.

He carefully shifts the body onto its back. Will Graham stares up at him with glassy eyes.

Hannibal remembers this. Another memory, like the snow where Will had found him in their first shared dream. Or a dream-approximation of one.

He carefully presses fingers to Will's listless wrist. A dribble of water leaks out his bluish lips and down over one crumpled cheek. This victim by the riverbank had fought back—not unusual in and of itself—but the preservation had been significant. All signs pointed to a clean kill and the desire to keep the body. He and Jack had eventually determined that this victim was not the first, but had been summarily discarded for reasons unknown. Unfit, somehow.

The wrist is clammy, cold, still. The real victim had been long dead when Hannibal had arrived, and Will appears no different. From what Will told him and what little he remembers of the two previous dreams, Will had been alive. Not just alive but active, able to exert control over landscape and behavior and reality.

"Will," Hannibal says. "Are you here with me?"

The corpse doesn't stir. Doesn't give him any sign that this is anything other than Hannibal's own dream. Only it can't be, because until Will Graham, he hadn't dreamed since he was a young man.

So he waits for the dream to change. But waiting is only stasis; nothing shifts around him. Will is dead, and Hannibal is alive and alone. He breathes and the river thunders but the trees are serene and soundless. Not even a whisper of wind shakes the branches, and no breath expands Will's ribs.

Just as Hannibal drags his knuckles over Will's unbroken cheekbone, something moves in the forest around him. His head jerks up, scanning the sparse trees. The woods are barren, empty; no Jack, no investigators combing and local fishermen dredging the river.

A chill winds through him. Empty and slippery. A blank slice of nothing.

The chill doesn't unsettle him, but it doesn't feel like it belongs to him. Fear is a novel concept, a thing to be examined, dissected, understood. Not something he's *felt* in a very long time. But Hannibal doesn't want to stand, doesn't want to leave Will here.

It isn't him. It wasn't then, it isn't now.

But what if it is? In dreaming, memories distort, and he could be leaving the real Will here, dead and alone, until one or either of them finally wakes.

Hannibal scowls at the mud slicking the sleeves and breast of his wool coat as he hefts Will's corpse into his arms. He shifts until Will's head settles against his shoulder, unseeing gaze staring into nowhere, and sets off back towards the road.

He only gets several labored yards through the mud before an iron ball of unseen force slams into his stomach and drives him to his knees. He keeps his grip on Will, clammy and dead and reeking of preservative.

Only just.

Before he can struggle back to his feet, the dream tears itself to ribbons around him and he hurtles awake.

Hannibal blinks at the ceiling, long and firm— *the power shoving him out of the dream was unmistakably a foreign thing; Will's experiment bearing fruit, perhaps; but of what kind, he isn't entirely certain.* His own experiment, on the other hand, clearly bore nothing. The dream softens and fades quickly until all he can remember is the riverbank and Will's lifeless face.

A shard of alien, cold dread, however, wedges deep under his skin like a splinter. It takes the rest of the night to shake off.

Will wakes up sobbing.

His bed feels empty. His house does. His soul does. There's nothing within him except the memory of being inert flesh, heavy and cold and clotting, and the sight, but not the sensation, of Hannibal caring for him one last time.

Hannibal bent over his corpse, his face blurred because Will's eyes could not focus.

He'd tried to change the dream; he'd made a double, taken its place. He'd tried to call out.

It hadn't mattered. Hannibal hadn't noticed he was there and Will hadn't stayed to watch him grieve, fleeing rather than face the truth of his own death.

He staggers out of bed. It's nowhere near dawn. He knows he won't sleep again.

In the kitchen, he stares at the remaining coffee beans from Hannibal, and shoves the package to the back of a drawer. He drinks shitty tea instead, shivering and trying to contain himself. This doesn't feel like progress; if anything, that dream was an unmitigated disaster. But at least Hannibal will be by in the evening.

Only a few more hours of being alone. He can manage. He *can*.

As dawn breaks over the water districts, a sharp knock issues from Will's door. He knows that knock.

It is not Hannibal's.

oOo

The jarring carriage ride to one of the smaller hamlets just outside the city does nothing to help Will's headache. He sits across from Crawford, who had pointedly ignored all of his protests of being on bedrest.

"If you're on bedrest," he'd said, "then why are you out of bed and already dressed this early?"

And his gaze had dropped to the lingering bruise on Will’s jawline.

Will hadn't been able to explain. He hadn't even been able to demand that Crawford at least alert Hannibal. He hadn’t known what to say, and Crawford wasn’t patient on a good day.

As they travel, Crawford rattles off what his team already knows. A Miss LeBeau had been found mutilated in the room she kept at a nice, quiet lodging house. No known visitors, male or otherwise. Another lodger claimed to have heard a scream, but said it was short, and wordless. The body had been discovered in the early morning when the lodging housekeeper had gotten up to stoke the fire and found the back door open, and, above, LeBeau's door open as well.

"It's messy," Crawford warns as they disembark from the carriage. "Let me know if you need anything."

Need anything, when it comes to Crawford, has a very limited definition. Will *needs* help holding his mind together; Crawford will just have somebody cover the body. The offer isn’t a lie, simply a mismatch in meaning, and it always makes Will feel alone. Isolated. But he doesn't protest. He tucks his spectacles into his pocket and sheds his coat as he enters the building. With all the doors open for Crawford’s team letting in the frigid air, the owner has built the fires up to sweltering, and five steps inside has him sweating. It only gets worse as he ascends the stairs.

The room is much how he imagined it, though the pool of blood is far larger. The rest of Crawford's team heads out as he takes in the room and the body now laying on the bed. Her face has been slashed open, mutilated beyond recognition, but the rest of her appears unharmed.

He circles the pool of blood, and pictures where the body must have lain. Just beside the bed; a curious location for a murder. The bed has a long bedskirt, likely concealing Miss LeBeau's belongings. The blood doesn't touch the fabric.

Slowly, Will eases himself down to the floor in between the blood and the bed, as close to the body’s original location as he can get. His eyes close, and he pictures a pendulum.

(Mesmerism is charlatanry, but learning it as a younger man taught him tricks to focus.)

Miss LeBeau was not dragged from her bed. She'd been out of bed, roused by—something. The open bedroom door? She'd gotten up to check it. No, not the door, something farther away. A sound from outside? Something that took her out of the room and then, when she'd come back to the bed—

Will's eyes snap open, and he stares into the face of a corpse.

Someone howls; he doesn't think it's him, but it might be. The corpse grabs for him, and he rolls away, into the pool of blood. It is tacky but not dry, and it soaks into his clothes, cold against his skin, trapping him.

No, the corpse is trapping him. Feeling his face. Searching for *something*.

"Calm down, please, be calm," Will says, words falling over each other, and he's not asking for the corpse's sake so much as he's asking for *himself*, because as his panic grows, as he grapples with the thing on top of him, he's aware of shadows gathering in the room. Reflexive protection. He grabs hold of the corpse, of its overripe arms, and tries to push it back. Footsteps pound on the stairs, and Crawford is coming, and—

And the corpse tears away with another sobbing wail, leaving a wide swath of skin in his fist as it flees the room.

He stares at the grey slough of skin, even as he hears Crawford seize the corpse. Even as he hears shouting, demands to know the corpse's name.

The corpse is weeping.

Will can't breathe. All he sees is his own lifeless flesh, limp in Hannibal's arms. His own body, dead on the drawing room floor, face destroyed.

Face destroyed. He turns his head and stares up at the wreckage of Beth LeBeau's face, only barely visible from where he remains, overwhelmed, in her blood.

Time grows slippery.

He drops the skin to the floor. He gets up, eventually (after too long spent in the cold and clinging blood; he only thinks to move after Crawford asks if he's intending to stay there all day). He talks to Crawford, briefly, just enough to say he needs space to recover. Then Crawford isn't there anymore. The blood that has soaked through his shirt and trousers dries; he doesn't notice when. He moves, but barely feels it.

Will crawls into the closet Miss LeBeau hardly used. Even sitting with his knees curled up to his chest, he barely fits inside. It isn't comfortable.

He doesn't care about comfort.

And neither does his double, who stares at him from the pulp of a face Will destroyed six nights ago. This time, it's not the echo of Stammets watching him. It's LeBeau's killer.

Dead. They're both dead. Have been dead. All it took was meeting another living corpse for him to stop fighting it.

When Hannibal checks his post box on his way back from his third patient of the day, he finds a rumpled letter bearing Jack Crawford's untidy scrawl:

A MEDICAL MYSTERY, DOCTOR. COME AT ONCE, EVEN IF INCONVENIENT, with an address at the bottom.

Hannibal tilts his head, reads the message again. A case, more than likely, but Jack hasn't asked him to consult at a scene since the body in the river— *a body that had turned into a whole wheel of stitched-together corpses by the end of it all*. He sends a runner to tell the rest of his roster that he will make their visits tomorrow and hails the nearest carriage.

When he finally reaches the lodging house a good distance outside the city, he finds Jack— *and Jack's people, some he recognizes, milling about; they always seem to be doing that —* waiting in front of the shuttered doors of a police wagon.

"Doctor, thank you for coming," Jack says.

Hannibal tugs his gloves off and tucks them in his pockets. "I trust you have good reason for taking me away from my patients."

Under the brim of his broad hat, Jack's expression sobers. "I think my reason will become very clear here in a moment."

He raps once on the door and steps back as the door flings open from the inside. Two of Jack's men sit on benches on either side of the wagon staring down at a young woman curled on the floor between them.

Her skin stretches tight over her bones, tinged an unhealthy, pallid grey like a corpse. A great swath of her left forearm is the raw pink of new flesh; the right is soaked in tacky blood up to the elbow. The rest of her clothes match, deep red all down the front. She stares out at Hannibal with dark eyes, blank and bloodshot and sunk into her face— *he gets the impression she's staring through him; the glazed, snapshot look of the newly dead.*

Hannibal draws closer to the wagon and crouches down to her level.

"She butchered a young woman sometime last night and was still hiding under her bed when we showed up," Jack explains, coming up to his side. He lifts his brows at the girl. "She hasn't said a word since we dragged her out here."

"It looks like her skin came off," Hannibal says.

"It certainly did. Strangest thing I've ever seen. On the living, anyway. Any idea why?"

"We all shed our skin every day, tiny bits of ourselves at a time. We hardly miss them in our bodies' attempts to make us anew. This is something else. It looks as if the tissue is dying, but without any true necrosis." Hannibal straightens up. "I've never seen anything like this, Jack."

— the woman isn't close enough to smell; he isn't about to explain his keen sense to Jack for something he might not be able to identify —

Jack sighs heavily. "It isn't contagious, is it, Doctor? Because my people had to touch her to bring her down here and Graham was the one that pulled that bit of skin off of her arm when she tried to attack him—"

All of Hannibal's focus zeros in on Jack, his face going utterly blank. "Will is here?"

Jack regards him for a long moment, brow pulling, confused. Hannibal registers the reason only a beat too late— *Will, he called him Will* —which is long enough for Jack's look to turn suspicious, a silent demand for an explanation. Hannibal doesn't give him one.

“He is,” Jack says carefully— *all the while filing that bit of information away for later; he can tell, can hear it in Jack’s voice.* “He started looking somewhat ill and asked for some space, so we let him have the run of the room. Dr. Lecter, this young woman is the priority here, she—”

“Appears to be stable and in good hands.” He throws a quick look back to the wagon where the girl blinks balefully up at Jack’s men, confused. Or curious. “Will is not well. I wasn’t aware my bedrest order was going to be violated only days after I suggested it.”

Jack spreads out his hands and shrugs. “He answered the door.”

Hannibal knows his voice is flat, calm, collected, when he says, “Hardly tacit permission. May I see him, please?”

After a hard-pressed sigh and a narrowed look at the placid woman in the police wagon, Jack yells for one of his people to take Hannibal into the boarding house. The heat hits him the moment he crosses the threshold, stuffy enough that he quickly unbuttons his coat.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, Dr. Lecter,” Beverly Katz says as she leads him up the stairs. “Are you joining the team for this case or just making a crime-scene call?”

“The latter,” Hannibal answers with a polite smile when Miss Katz opens one of the doors in the second floor hallway.

The room is hardly large and Will is nowhere to be found. The window is shut. His gaze sweeps immediately from the mangled woman on the bed, to the lake of blood, to the wide sticky spots at its edge before settling on the closet door.

Miss Katz frowns, sticks her head through the doorway, and says, “He was here a moment ago.”

— Will hasn’t gone far —

Hannibal puts a hand on Miss Katz’s shoulder with a small dip of his head.

“Thank you, Miss Katz, I believe Will would prefer to do this privately,” he says.

Only when the door closes behind him does Hannibal cross to the closet and gently tug it open to find Will curled in the corner— *hunched over himself, so like the dream of the riverbank* . He isn’t alone. He stares with unfocused eyes at the shadowy limbs tangled with his own. The double’s face is nearly unrecognizable, a ruin, and close enough that if it breathed, the air would stir Will’s curls. It drips tar over cheerful blue paint where the back of its head is half-crushed into the wall, and after a moment, its remaining translucent eye swivels to meet Hannibal’s gaze.

— he’s torn between fascination and something far darker that’s struck a match in his chest and lit a pool of something hot and dark and ugly; it feels as if something has been taken from him —

Hannibal drops to his knees and reaches out for the double. The moment his fingers brush that unsettling eye closed, the shadow dissipates in a rush of smoke.

“Will,” he says, clear and firm. “Can you hear me?”

Will does nothing but slump back against the closet wall, slow. And away from him. He peers down at his chest as if he doesn’t understand what he’s looking at, chin tilting just as painstakingly as the rest of his movements.

“The dead hate the faces of the living,” he murmurs.

“The dead don’t hate,” Hannibal says, not daring to move any closer— *Will’s brow is wan and sweaty; he wants to smooth his hand over it*. “Hate requires passion and rage, disgust and fear. It’s as much a response of the flesh as it is a feeling. And feeling is the purview of the living.”

With a quick glance at the door, he quickly slips his cravat free and flicks open the top buttons of his shirt. Only then does he reach out for Will’s wrist— *cold, dead-fish limp* —and props Will’s lax fingers against his clavicles, directly brushing his Mark. The brand lights up with sudden feeling at Will’s touch and Hannibal searches his face.

“Do you feel alive, Will?”

A beat. Two.

Will says, “No.”

It sounds like the syllable takes a monumental effort.

“The dead—” Hannibal curls two fingers around the soft skin of Will’s wrist. “—do not know they’re dead.”

He stills, listening to the alternating pattern of his and Will’s breaths, before softly tapping his fingers. It’s the slow, rhythmic gait of chambers squeezing, blood perfusing— *his pulse; a beat that barely rises for fear or panic or consequence.*

“Think of the time. Think of where you are. Think of *who* you are,” he says, just low enough for Will to hear. “Repeat after me. *It’s midday. I’m in Harbrook. My name is Will Graham.*”

Hannibal expects Will to look away from him or glare or bite out an acerbic comment.

He doesn’t. Hannibal’s brows pull close.

“It’s midday. I’m in Harbrook. My name is Will Graham,” Will repeats after a long moment. No inflection, utterly emotionless. “I killed myself one week ago.”

— something in him thrills at that sentence; he only wishes it was delivered with more feeling —

Hannibal barely takes a moment to consider. After another quick glance at the door, he loosens his grip on Will's wrist and slides both of his hands up Will's jaw— *Will moves like a doll, because he is dead or thinks that he is* —tipping his head back until he holds Will's skull in a loose cradle of his fingers.

He digs the pads of his thumbs into Will's temples and slides inside him.

It's less a slide and more a push, less a push and more an unspooling. Hannibal moves quickly, anticipating the white-hot rush of the Mark that will likely incinerate him once it catches up— *it will; he's done this to someone Marked once before* . Hannibal skirts the sulci of his brain, twining branches of himself into nerves and lighting them up from the inside out. He shoves his— *Will's* —hand harder into his— *his* —Mark.

Will is liquid, a riptide of feeling, and it's all Hannibal can do not to get pulled under— *it occurs to him he's never felt properly in his life; he's got a ticking box where his heart should be and holes in the floor of his mind.*

Hannibal rakes over sensory neurons in Will's feet, hands, all over his skin. He clenches onto cardiac muscle, atria and ventricles down to the myomeres, and coaxes them to racing, to sending blood anywhere and everywhere.

He is Will and he is *inside* Will and his voice is a haunting:

You're alive, you're alive, you're alive

Will *feels* .

A firestorm crashes over him and everything dead and dormant in him blazes to life in a thousand different colors. The iron scent of blood fills his nose, and sweat, and coal fire smoke. His mouth is dry and aching, his body cramped tight, every joint screaming for leniency. He stares into Hannibal's eyes, and sees them distant, vacant, a mirror of what his must have been. Hannibal's Mark burns under his hand, and his fingers twitch, curl, hanging onto his throat like he has so many times (too many times) before. His own Mark answers, like it always does.

"*Hannibal?"* he whispers. He doesn't mean to whisper it; his lips aren't moving.

He can't say anything else. And that's when he realizes that, as much as feeling *alive* , he feels not alone. Pointedly, overwhelmingly not alone. It's like Hannibal isn't in front of him, but inside him, nuzzling into his body and brain—and he can't reach out and touch him. That, more than any horror, is what makes his Mark flare and push *back* , trying to get Hannibal where he is supposed to be.

Waves of raw, electric power buffet through him, and if he concentrates, Will can feel Hannibal tangled up inside him now. Tendrils slide between his muscles, twine along his nerves, and as the Mark peels them away, inch by inch, Will shudders, mouth working without sound. His eyes roll back.

Just before they do, he sees Hannibal smile.

Then it's over, and Will is spent. He is the only thing in his body, and Hannibal strokes his sweat-slick temples.

"Will. If you're back and you can hear me, I need you to move your hand away from my neck."

Without thinking, Will mutters, "But I thought you enjoyed this," as he loosens his grasp.

Distantly, he's aware of Hannibal pulling his fingers away, setting his hand in his lap before quickly re-hiding the Mark.

Will feels…scoured. Scoured, every inch of his body and soul stinging. The certainty of his own unlife hovers at the margins, but is, for the moment, outside of him. He looks stiffly around at the confines of the closet and the blood dried all over him.

"She thinks she's dead," he says after a moment. "The killer. She's sure of it."

Just like I was sure of it. Will be sure of it again.

"You saw her and what she felt overwhelmed you," Hannibal says.

He huffs a breath. "Something like that. Matched up with something already inside me."

"I'd imagine you could find something within any of us to match with. Can you stand?"

Will frowns mightily as he braces a hand against the wall and staggers to his feet. He nearly falls, legs only newly not-numb thanks to Hannibal.

(They'll have to discuss that. The...possession. It will be difficult, because Will can't be angry about it.)

The closet is stifling, but Will realizes with a start how very cold he is, despite that fact. He's shivering. Hannibal shucks off his coat and drapes it over Will's shoulders, then slips a steadying arm around his waist. Will leans against him in relief.

"I should warn you," Hannibal says, warm against his brow, "that you may start to experience erratic nerve pain, some skin oversensitivity, emotional instability, heart palpitations, perhaps some respiratory and digestive discomfort. But I would imagine all of it will subside in several days."

Will flexes one hand, stunned by the litany of side effects rattled off like they're nothing. *How much experimentation has he done?*

He's about to ask when he remembers Katz outside the room. "Is Crawford still here?" he asks instead. Then, brow furrowing, "Wait, why are you—?"

Not for him. Surely not for him.

Hannibal leads him out of the closet and into the bedroom proper, steering him pointedly away from the blood and the body and toward the door.

“Jack was interested in my medical opinion. He’s outside with your shedding young woman.”

"She's still here?" Will asks. He curls his fingers into Hannibal's coat reflexively, pulling it tighter. "I don't know if I should—look at her, again. I can find commonality with almost anybody, but it's—it's more than that, with her." He considers, then stops them just before the door and says, softly, "Do you remember last night's dream?"

This is not the time or place for this discussion, and Will shivers at just the thought of it, but he needs Hannibal to understand how—how fragile he is, right now.

Hannibal turns from the door and looks back at Will.

“Parts of it,” he answers, then lowers his voice. “I believe I was dreaming of the first case Jack asked me to consult on. Tell me how you saw the scene.”

Will considers, then guides them both toward the window, the better to not be overheard.

He keeps his voice low. “I was dead. You tried to rouse me, but I couldn’t speak. I tried to force the dream to let me by doubling myself like in your drawing room, but you still couldn’t hear me. I was still dead. It didn’t matter if I was the original or the double, I just—”

He is growing agitated, and he cuts himself off, wincing. His hand tightens on Hannibal’s sleeve, then falls away as he tries to get control back.

“And the whole while, you never left my corpse. You—mourned it. And took it with you when you left.” He takes a shaky breath, staring at the bare bit of floor beneath him. No blood, luckily. “It was—it was surprisingly hard to watch. And the dream clung to me all morning.”

“It’s still clinging to you,” Hannibal says. “And that is my responsibility. You’re grieving, Will. Not for any life you have taken, but for the life that was taken from you. The one you lived before *this* .”

The Mark. The chaos.

Yes, he is grieving; that’s a good word for it. Grieving and afraid of what it will mean. What any new life could look like, from here.

Hannibal sets a hand over the coat right over Will’s Mark.

“But you are not dead. You are not a shadow of yourself, former or otherwise. I want you to remember the present moment. The now. As often as you can, think of where you are and when.”

“All my dreams are of my own death at my own hands,” he says, with bitter humor. “It will take a great deal of reminding.”

The present, though—yes, that's a reasonable place to start.

So he leans in and kisses Hannibal, softly, the better to anchor himself in the moment.

Hannibal strokes a gentle touch along Will's jaw. "Yes, a great deal," he murmurs between kisses. "And better dreams."

He pulls away and guides his hand back to Will's shoulder.

"But first, let's get you home. Surely this house has a kitchen exit. Let's see if Miss Katz can escort you out the back while I speak with Jack."

"No, I don't—don't leave me," Will says, then feels himself go pink in the cheeks. "That—that is, I'm not sure being alone until after the rest of your rounds will serve me well."

And nobody else who might be willing to keep him company would understand.

"I don't plan on leaving you. Except to speak with Jack, where it isn't safe for you to be at the moment," Hannibal says and leads Will back to the door.

Relief leaves him light-headed, but in the next breath, Will winces with shame. "I'll be taking you from your other patients."

"I appreciate your concern, but I cancelled my appointments before I arrived here. You aren't the only one who knows the uncertain demands of a crime scene."

Oh.

Hannibal has already thought this through.

He opens the door, and Katz is still there, bags of analysis equipment at her feet. Will is glad it isn't Crawford.

"Miss Katz," Hannibal says, tone sure, and Will wants to just let himself be carried along. "Could you get Will outside without taking him by Jack or the wagon?"

Katz looks the two of them over, gaze lingering on Will for a moment. He thinks too late that perhaps he shouldn't be standing so close to Hannibal, that perhaps she'll assume some—impropriety, but the moment passes.

"Of course," she says. "Rough time in there, huh? We could've found you an, uh, less occupied room."

Will manages a right smile. "Was putting some last pieces together. Dr. Lecter helped."

And then Katz's hand replaces Hannibal's, just enough to get him moving down the back stairs. Will glances behind them only once, and catches a glimpse of Hannibal's soft smile before he heads the other way.

They reach the ground floor and exit out into the chilly daylight. She steers them to a bare patch of wall, close enough to see the road, but with something approximating privacy. "Hey," she says, voice softer than it had been inside. "Seriously, are you okay? You look…"

"Unstable?" He shrugs. "Nothing new there."

"There's unstable, and then there's dead on your feet."

Will winces at the turn of phrase. "Why didn't somebody clear the room?" he asks. "Would've been a lot less *rough* if I'd actually been alone."

"No clue. Want me to yell at Crawford about it?" She inclines her head, trying to catch his gaze. He doesn't let her, but he does make himself relax somewhat to reassure her. "I'll do it," she adds. "You could have gotten seriously hurt in there."

He pictures Katz chewing Crawford out, and as satisfying as it is, he doesn't want her in the middle of something that's just as much his fault.

"Don't," he says.

"Then tell me something I *can* do."

A little light heresy? It might still be worth trying to cut the Mark out of his skin. But that thought leads back to Hannibal, and the wool still draped over his shoulders.

"You could get me my coat, I guess," he says. "Bad form, absconding with your doctor's clothes."

Katz snorts. "I'll get it. You okay to be alone for a second?"

He finds a smile for her. It's a little twitchy. She's seen worse. "I'll be fine."

She hesitates, then disappears back inside, and Will is alone again. A breeze tugs at what hair isn't plastered to his skull with blood. The world opens up around him: the rattle of carriage wheels, the scent of roasting fish from a shop down the way, a symphony of voices he doesn't know and can't pick out the specifics of. It's just this side of overwhelming, but it's—it's good.

He tries not to listen for Crawford's voice, even as Katz reappears with his coat and hands it over.

"You should get back in there," he says, shrugging out of Hannibal's and into his own. "Though I might have disrupted things too much."

"I'll get to it. Are you back for good?"

He shakes his head. "Supposed to be on bedrest."

"Then get yourself to a bed, Will," Katz says.

Will glances at the door reflexively, and Katz catches it, quirks her brow. He clears his throat. “Working on it.”

Katz eyes him a moment longer, but blessedly doesn’t comment before heading back into the house. Will closes his eyes and leans back against the wall.

Hannibal finds Jack pacing in front of the wagon with its doors still thrown open, exacting gaze trained on the young woman on the floor as if his will alone can restrain her. She doesn’t look like she has any interest in moving at all, gripping onto the sleeves of her bloodied dress with nails unevenly bitten down.

Before Jack can get a word in, Hannibal stops him mid-pace and says, “I’m afraid I have to leave. I suggest you call on Dr. Sutcliffe at the University Hospital. I knew him in my hospitalist years. He has a certain interest in unusual diseases and may have a better sense of this woman’s affliction than I do.”

Jack braces his hands on his hips and nods curtly. He clearly wants to push.
“Understood, Doctor, you have your patients.”

“I’m taking Will with me, Jack, and I suggest that you let him finish out the rest of his bedrest in peace. The body needs a clear mind and adequate rest to properly fight off an illness.”

“This,” Jack says, terse, and gestures to the wagon, the team at large. “What we do. Can weaken the body. If you allow it. I don’t allow it, but Will...he takes too much of this with him.”

— this is a delicate balance, his hand on Will’s shoulder and Jack’s on the other; together they could steer Will into the darkness metamorphosing inside him —

Hannibal nods. “More so than most, or so I’ve come to understand. He must be given enough room to recover, if you wish to have him back. The price of borrowing his imagination. Do I have your word that you’ll leave him to his bedrest?”

With Jack’s reluctant agreement, Hannibal directs his hired carriage around to the back of the house where he finds Will, lashes fluttering, eyes shifting sightlessly under paper-pale lids as he leans against the wall.

“Will?” Hannibal asks quietly, resisting the urge to touch Will so openly here— *Will wouldn’t likely appreciate it* .

Will’s eyes open, focused and lively and present. “Still here,” he says. A little slower than optimal, perhaps, as if his mind is still occupied. Then he pushes away from the wall and holds out his coat. "Thank you. For all of this.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Will. I’d hardly be fulfilling my physician’s oath if I refused to help you.” Hannibal takes the garment— *smile already tucked away* —and folds it over his arm.

Will’s contemplation becomes fidgeting. Not as agitated as before, when he related his side of the dream, but notably all the same. “Did you tell Crawford that she thinks she's—dead?” he asks at last. “And the thing, about the faces. He should know."

“I recommended Jack to a colleague of mine who may be able to understand what that woman is suffering from, but, yes, I will pass that information along. Tomorrow, after I am certain you’re alright,” Hannibal promises as he gently nudges Will up and into the cab. “Would you prefer your house or mine?”

Will pauses in the doorway, then looks down at him. Tongues his lip, then swallows.

“Yours,” he says.

He sounds certain. Hannibal smiles, teeth and all, and goes to tell the driver.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“Close your eyes,” he says, “and go to sleep remembering you are alive.”

Will is a wreck, but how could he be anything else after the day he’s had? The week? With Hannibal bridging the gap, it’s easier to acknowledge what he wants to do. What he needs to do.

“Stay,” Will says, softly, and urges Hannibal down onto the bed beside him.

--

Will gets a bath and a nap. Hannibal has a visitor.

The ride back to Hannibal’s house is swift. Will spends much of it gazing out the window, caught between the morass of his own thoughts—less all-consuming than before, but still distracting—and this newfound (and likely brief) fascination in the landscape going by. Harbrook is not the countryside by any means, but there are trees and glimpses of open land, chickens scratching about by the side of the lane and unclouded sky above. One or two motor cars occasionally pass the carriage, and Will wonders if the department will get around to purchasing some for Jack’s team. He wonders if Hannibal has ever driven one.

As they near the city proper, the grey of industry settles back in. The automobiles grow few and far between as the roads grow tight and choked with pedestrians, and electric light poles sprout up in place of trees.

Through the whole length of the journey, he doesn’t talk, but he does dart little glances over at Hannibal, as if to assure himself the man is still there.

He always is.

Even on his way to Hannibal’s home that first day, and on his subsequent errands, Will had moved through the city with his head down, gaze turned largely inward. Now, he drinks in everything. It feels like coming home, in a way. Like he’s been lost for weeks.

But some things have changed while he was focused inward. Every person they pass in the street appears as if behind some invisible but unbreachable veil. His chest aches as if the very muscles wrapping his ribs fear exposure. And the bulk of the Inquisitors’ barracks at Holstead Square, lights blazing even during the daytime and masked Inquisitors out front, is

now threatening. He has never loved it, but a certain amount of fear and rage now simmer within him, and he isn't sure if it's his own wariness or something innate to the Mark.

By the way Hannibal shifts in the seat across from him, a subtle readjustment that nevertheless speaks to an alertness, he is not alone.

The carriage rounds a corner, leaving Holstead behind, and starts the climb into the district where Hannibal resides. The roads are cleaner, here, the facades more stately, the air a little fresher. Trees join the streetlights and Will thinks he even spots a songbird or two in the branches.

When they come to a stop a short while later, he thinks the side effects Hannibal mentioned might be starting; the stop is not harsh, but he feels jolted all the same. He eases himself out of the carriage more gingerly than he usually would. His head, too, has begun to ache again —but that's not abnormal.

He's halfway up the front steps, gait careful, when Hannibal appears at his side with a steadying hand on his elbow.

"Feeling unbalanced?" he asks.

"Something like that," he agrees, glancing over with a quick smile. "Starting to feel the after-effects of your treatment, I think."

He wonders, for a moment, if he could shed them by trading places with a fresh double, then casts it aside. He doesn't want to go any further down that road unless absolutely necessary.

He rubs at his jaw, where the blood has clotted into day old stubble.

"I hope the driver wasn't too horrified by my appearance," he murmurs. Most of the worst of it was covered by his coat, though not all.

"I should think they've seen worse in their tenure," Hannibal says with a soft look.

Once inside, Will is again grateful for his lack of house staff. It makes him a little less self-conscious as Hannibal insists on taking Will's coat, hanging it up alongside his own. But he still flushes and looks away as Hannibal takes his measure, from boots sticky with blood to the patches of hair matted to his scalp with dark red.

"A bath, I think." Hannibal begins to roll up his sleeves. "Boots off, if you would. Socks as well."

Will obeys, eager to get out of his soiled clothing, but as he rolls off his first sock, balanced awkwardly on one foot, his gaze fixes on Hannibal's bared forearms.

"You don't mean to accompany me, do you?" he asks.

(The idea provokes a complex set of reactions, many positive, but several wary. Then again, he's been naked now in two of Hannibal's dreams.)

He gets the other sock off and stuffs both into his boots, then straightens up, shoulders more hunched than he'd like. But he's also tired, and the idea of having a hot bath while also not needing to be alone...he feels like a skittish animal, desiring the food in Hannibal's hand, but trained by experience to hang back.

“Not into the bath, no,” Hannibal says, with a small twitch of his lips. “But I will draw it for you.” His gaze lingers another moment, then he gestures for Will to follow. “I’ll prepare something to eat, as well, while you wash.”

"That sounds—perfect," Will says, then laughs a little, dryly, as he heads upstairs behind Hannibal. "I don't suppose I can borrow some clean clothing, too, along with all the other kindnesses?"

“Certainly,” Hannibal replies. “But you don’t have to borrow kindness, Will. Not from me. Consider it freely given.”

Relieved, Will fiddles with the buttons on his vest and shirt as they reach the second floor hall, eagerness to shed blood-stiff garments warring with propriety. Eagerness wins, and his Mark is bared by the time they reach the bathroom.

It’s expansive, with a wide copper tub. Hannibal heads to it directly and spins on the taps at full force. He tweaks and tests, dabbing drops of water onto his wrist—testing the temperature as if for a child. Will stares, unsure if he’s insulted or charmed.

Charmed, he decides. Embarrassed, but charmed.

“Thank you,” he says, dropping his waistcoat to the tiled floor.

Will can see Hannibal smile, but as he bustles about the room, retrieving vials and soaps, he keeps his gaze averted. *Gentlemanly of him*. He’s not sure the last time he was taken care of quite like this.

As Hannibal sets the items near enough to the tub that Will can reach them without assistance, he comments, “You and Miss Katz seem close.”

Will cocks his head. There’s no censure in Hannibal’s tone, only curiosity, and Will understands it after a beat; Hannibal knows he isn’t a particularly trusting man, after all.

“She has a way of getting past my defenses,” he says, shrugging out of his shirt. “Her bluntness is...refreshing. Has been since we met on the Maestro case.”

Hannibal clearly recognizes the moniker, and seems surprised, gaze flicking dangerously close to Will’s bare chest. “You haven’t been working with Jack for as long as I first imagined.”

Will tilts his head. “And what did you imagine?”

“That you’d known Jack at least as long as I have.” He brings a towel over to the side of the bath. “Though in that case, we’d have likely met when he asked for my professional opinion on the body in the river.”

“I only formally joined his team six months ago, give or take. Before that, I consulted by letter. Occasionally.” His lips twitch toward a smile. “I think that must have been one of the cases I tossed into the fireplace unopened. Eventually, Crawford determined I’d have a harder time ignoring him if he showed up on my doorstep personally.”

“And when he felt his presence would no longer suffice to coax you out, he sent me,” Hannibal says, amused, and twists the taps off. “Feel free to add more water as necessary. Everything you should need is right here.”

And then Hannibal is gone, before Will can say anything else.

Will stares after him, feeling startlingly bereft, but has to concede that, if he’d stayed, Will would have kept talking and forgotten entirely about the bath. He peels himself out of his shirt and trousers, revealing skin stained dark beneath. Leaving everything in a filthy heap, he climbs into the tub.

It's the perfect temperature, and he sinks in with a groan, so far that only his face and knees stay above the surface. The bathwater will all be pink, soon, so he takes a deep breath and ducks under to scrub his face.

When he comes back up, he's panting from more than a held breath. What should have been easy has left him wrung out, and he sags back against the wall of the tub. A moment to recover, and he'll start on his hair. He just needs to wait for the throbbing in his head to recede a little, and for his muscles to untense. For his heart to slow back to normal.

If only Hannibal had agreed to—

A soft knock interrupts him, and another heady dose of relief washes over him. He tilts his head toward the door despite the pain.

"That trick of yours is merciless," he says, by way of greeting the unseen physician.

It’s hardly an invitation inside— *but Will’s voice makes it sound like one.* A slight smile pulls at Hannibal’s mouth.

“I suspect my anatomical understanding allows me to be precise in my conquest,” he says, entering the washroom with clothes— *in the simplest styles he owns; underclothes, too, that Will can ignore if necessary*. He grazes a look over Will’s pale knees just poking out above the water, and deposits the fresh clothes on the sill of the small window.

“Precision and mercy aren’t opposites,” Will says, then makes a soft groan of discomfort. It’s unclear if it was vocalized for Hannibal’s benefit or not. “If this is precise, I’d hate to see imprecise. I feel like I’ve been kicked by a horse.”

Hannibal moves his gaze carefully off the top of Will’s head and away to other corners of the bathroom. As a rule, he doesn't delude himself and he knows he would look if Will couldn’t see him— *he wouldn’t regret it if he did, but it could perhaps make his life more difficult.*

“Can you describe your symptoms? My understanding of my influence is still limited, for reasons that I am sure are obvious.”

“Think of the worst hangover you’ve ever had, mixed with a light fever.” Will is silent for just a beat, and then, a bit too quickly, he manages, “I’m not sure I can even wash my own hair right now. Is—could you—”

Hannibal gives Will a small nod— *he doesn’t even know if Will is looking at him* —and reaches for a second hand towel. He flips it over his shoulder and then kneels behind the head of the bathtub. He leans over Will to grab the soap from the dish, dips it quickly through the bathwater, and then massages it between his hands.

He slips one hand at the base of Will’s neck, lolling his head into the wide spread of his fingers and says, “Seeing as I’m the cause of your current predicament, I should be the one to set it right.”

He massages the soap against Will’s scalp, works his fingers through matted curls. Reddish brown suds slip down Will’s shoulders, cut paths down his neck as Hannibal shifts it back and forth to soap his entire head. Will melts into his touch, eyes fluttering closed as the tension in his body unwinds, dissipates like bubbles on the surface of the water.

“You’re doing a fantastic job,” Will mumbles.

His breathing evens into contended exhales, just skirting the edges of a moan— *one of them tips fully over that edge; he catches that sound, etches it into his mind* —as Hannibal rinses his head.

Hannibal says, “I don’t regret possessing you.”

“I don’t regret being possessed.” Will opens one eye, just enough to squint up at him. “Don’t do it again.”

Hannibal smiles to himself— *but he doesn’t promise that; if he did, he would have to keep it* —and lingers working his fingers at the base of Will’s skull even after all the soap has dispersed to pinkish froth that turns the bathwater filmy . As he lets his gaze travel to the planes of Will’s throat down to where his knees still poke out of the water, he’s uncertain whether or not the new opacity of the water disappoints him.

He leans down close to Will’s ear and says, “Come down to the kitchen when you’re clean and dressed. Unless there are other places you anticipate needing assistance washing.”

“One day I’m going to call your bluff, and hold you to your implications,” Will says—*but he notices the way Will shivers all the same*—and his chest moves in another slow exhale. “Not right now, though.”

Hannibal eases Will’s head back against the tub and leaves him to it.

He heads straight down to the kitchen and with a quick check of the time, begins to pull ingredients. Like the clothes he picked out for Will, he chooses nothing terribly overwrought

or fanciful. Cress sandwiches with the last slices of thigh he'd laboriously flavored and cured two months prior— *offal is a far greater delicacy, and to some degree he prefers it, but is more difficult to keep* —paired with soft cheeses, figs, and a tea blend intended to calm the mind and promote good sleep.

He sets a place at the prep table. He'd still prefer to eat in the dining room, even for a meal this simple, but this is a concession— *then again, it has almost been a week since Will last sat here, and he never did move the stool.*

This time when Will comes down the stairs, he doesn't linger in the entryway to the kitchen, uncertain and wary. He spies the place setting at the prep table and settles onto the stool. The clothes don't fit Will terribly well— *a little big in some places; he'd almost rather see Will in clothes that fit him well; or none at all* —but he seems at ease, almost comforted.

Hannibal pours him a cup of tea and sets milk and sugar in front of him. His gaze catches on Will's wet curls and the translucent spots on the collar of Will's— *his* —shirt where errant drops have found their way down.

"I'm going to send for your clothes and coat to be washed," he says, pouring himself a cup as well. He considers sending Will home with another sack of coffee beans; he's likely out or nearly there.

"You think they can actually be salvaged?" Will asks.

"An attempt can be made, at the very least. My laundress is used to a physician's soiled clothing."

Will huffs a quiet laugh and nods, taking a sip of tea and then adjusting it to his tastes.

Hannibal watches him for a while and muses, "Jack didn't seem overly concerned about your behavior at the scene. I assume he has some vested interest in protecting your head space. Yet he leaves you to your mental devices."

"I behaved in front of him," Will says. "I acted like it was just shock and that I simply needed time to adjust. He didn't see—the rest. And he had more pressing concerns."

Jack often does, especially when he's set his mind to something. Hannibal also suspects this talent extends to mentally filing down the edges of Will's distress, or over-estimating his strength— *he's learning the limits of both himself.*

"Please, eat." Hannibal gestures down at the food— *Will doesn't seem to be overly good at feeding himself; needs reminding.* "It will help clear your head."

Will obediently plucks up a fig and smears it with cheese.

Hannibal ducks back into the larder for another stool, which he sets on his side of the table. Once he's sat down across from Will, he asks, "Would you like to talk about those concerns?"

"The case?" Will picks up one of the sandwiches and takes a thoughtful bite, considering the question more than the food itself. "There's not much I can add that's helpful. She's certain

she's dead. She's terrified. She knew the victim, came to her for help, but—something was wrong with her face. It upset the killer, deeply. Made her feel devastatingly alone. She felt the same thing when she fell on me. So much fear."

"She is mired in the unreality of death. Even her delusion can't prevent her from fearing what she thinks she already is," Hannibal says, pressing his paring knife to the thin skin of a fig. It splits clean and easy. "Even those who believe their lives aren't worth living cling to the last few seconds of existence. Life is precious."

— he knows this many ways, inside and out, and has felt others' fear when he could not manage that depth himself; he knows fear and uncertainty, but in his own body, he measures it in teaspoons, forever scraping at a well with a shallow bottom —

"I'm not sure she can be convinced that she's alive the way you convinced me. Or at all." Will's expression drifts, still sharp, but slips somewhere intangible. "It's—absent external evidence. Absent logic."

"I don't believe it would be safe for me to try to possess her," Hannibal agrees. "For a variety of reasons, not just the obvious one."

Will inclines his head— *thoughts firmly back in the kitchen, back with him* —and his eyes track Hannibal's hands and the knife. "Do you fear getting lost? Or some contagion?"

"I'm uncertain about her condition. The nature of the skin deterioration troubles me, though I'm hoping Dr. Sutcliffe, the colleague I mentioned earlier, can provide further insight."

Hannibal lifts the knife and the fig to his mouth as Will considers the sandwich in front of him.

"What was it like, inside of me?" Will asks.

Hannibal goes still. The fruit is tart and soft against his lips. He eats it, takes his time.

"Like being a boat on the sea," he finally answers— *he doesn't try to catch Will's gaze, not directly.* "The ocean of your empathy is vast, its depths unknowable. You feel everything and anything, can understand anyone and everyone. It was enough to overwhelm even me and I took only a short plunge. But in your boat, at the heart of you, I could set the sails to catch any breeze. I could steer. It was clear that despite the killers that distort your perceptions and the precarious edge Jack Crawford has set you on, you know who you are."

The line of Will's shoulders smooths all at once, as if he'd been suddenly unburdened from some heavy load— *it makes him wonder what Will thought he would say; landscapes of the dead? rivers of blood? a dead, cold star; a world of mirrors and shadow?*

Hannibal tips his head a fraction to the side when Will's eyes grow slightly misty. Something in him shifts— *just slightly out of place* .

"You felt—close, when you were inside me," Will says, voice thick with emotion. "Like I could feel you everywhere. But I couldn't move or touch you in return. That's when I pushed

you out again."

"I was close, but even as your consciousness wanted to reach me, it couldn't separate from the moorings of your body," Hannibal says—'*like mine' goes unstated.* He pauses, running a finger along the handle of his teacup in thought. "It was humbling, to understand you so intimately. To see you. A gift."

Will smiles, tender and delicate— *so liable to be crushed* . He meets Hannibal's gaze.

"Thank you for telling me what you saw."

"Not ideal circumstances by any means." Hannibal gives him a soft look in return. "But thank you for letting me in."

"I guess we're somewhat even now, with my accidentally invading your dreams. Both intrusions done without the intention to harm, and without damage done, but intrusions all the same."

"Yes," Hannibal agrees, "it seems we are."

Will returns to his sandwich with a wry smile— *there is something undeniably satisfying about watching Will thoroughly enjoy the meat as easily as if it were salted pork; a private little moment of humor, all for him.*

He takes a bite and savors, and then, after he's swallowed, lifts his gaze to Hannibal. "Even Steven."

They finish their meal in pleasant silence, and after clearing their plates and pouring Will another cup of tea, Hannibal wordlessly leaves the room to fetch...something. Will is far too worn out to question it, and he just sits, enjoying the heavy satisfaction of a good meal and clean skin.

This is what it is to be alive , he tells himself. Every little sensory detail. Even the malleable passage of time. The soft anticipation that stirs when he hears Hannibal's returning footsteps.

Hannibal comes to the prep table and sets down a small, familiar bottle. More laudanum.

"We talked earlier of the nature of your own dreams," Hannibal says. "It's hard to lie still, easy to fear going to sleep when they are there to think about. Nothing to listen to but your breathing in the dark and the tiny clicks of your blinking eyes," he says and taps the bottle with a finger. "This will help you rest for a couple of hours."

It would also, no doubt, help with the lingering after-effects of Hannibal's intrusion, which persist even as he relaxes. And yet…

"I don't want to risk coming to rely on it," he says. "Sleep does sound—appealing. But I doubt I'd need it. I've been awake since around three in the morning."

And he'd gone to sleep late, at that.

“You only need enough to relax, not to put you under,” Hannibal reassures him. “I have no desire to disrupt your sleep schedule entirely. Three or four drops. At the most.”

“Could always try washing my hair again instead,” he says, only half-joking, as he reaches for the bottle. “Should I add it to the tea? And for your personal notes, it doesn’t stop the sleepwalking.” A grimace crosses his face. “You’ll want to lock me in again, even if it’s just for a nap.”

Hannibal plucks the bottle from his hand. He comes around to Will’s side of the prep table and unscrews the cap.

“That is more troubling. Sleepwalking even under the aid of sedatives points to a preternatural cause, not a physiological or psychological one.”

“It’s only happened once, I think. Not the other night, before that. But you’re probably right.”

Hannibal catches Will’s chin gently with his fingers, tilts it up. “Open your mouth if you would.”

Will flushes slightly. He gives Hannibal a long, searching look, but parts his lips obediently.

Hannibal's eyes seem to glow with pleasure as he squeezes a few drops of laudanum on Will’s tongue. He pushes up on his jaw gently to guide his mouth closed. Will swallows, shivering. He half expects something more, some touch to his throat, but Hannibal steps away and sets the bottle aside.

“Come,” he says, retrieving what must be the bedroom key from a hook on the back wall.

Will follows.

They return to the guest room he slept in that first night, just past the bathroom with its crumpled heap of bloody clothes. Will lowers himself down on the edge of the bed, already feeling the first gentle haze of the laudanum. A welcome seduction. He’ll fall asleep easily.

But then he’ll also be alone, and the thought sends a little bolt of panic through him. It’s ridiculous, but hard to ignore.

Hannibal lingers just outside the doorway, fingers lightly around the doorknob, waiting. Hannibal, who checked the bath water for him, washed his hair for him. Will doesn’t want to ask for more, and the man surely has things to get to, but after his dreams of the last few nights, Will is…scared. Even the oblivion of laudanum doesn’t seem like adequate protection.

He swallows down his nerves, and asks, “Could you stay? Just until I’m asleep? It won’t be long.”

“Of course.” Hannibal slips into the room, pulling the door half-shut behind him. He comes not to the bed, but to a chair set in the corner.

Embarrassment wars with the loneliness and the pull of the drugs as Will lies down. This should be enough; Hannibal is here. Just because he isn't—what, in the bed? Is that really what Will had been hoping for?—doesn't mean Will is alone.

But he feels watched, instead of kept company.

"Never mind," he says, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Shouldn't have asked. I'll manage."

And just like that, Hannibal is at his side.

His fingers slide around Will's, and he goes still as Hannibal maneuvers them against his own pulse. With his other hand, he feels for Will's veins, and then they're linked, two rhythms out of cadence but growing closer.

"Close your eyes," he says, "and go to sleep remembering you are alive."

Will is a wreck, but how could he be anything else after the day he's had? The week? With Hannibal bridging the gap, it's easier to acknowledge what he wants to do. What he needs to do.

"Stay," Will says, softly, and urges Hannibal down onto the bed beside him.

Feeling Hannibal's pulse is grounding, but he'd rather hear it. Rather have Hannibal against him, the way the possession had felt. Maybe the drugs are getting to him, but it seems like the most important thing in the world.

And Hannibal must understand, because he goes where Will leads. Slips off his shoes and nudges Will gently over so he has a place to lay down, propped against the headboard. He goes so far as to drape a comforting arm around Will's shoulders, taking hold of his wrist once more and encouraging Will to lean against him.

No protest. Not even a slight stiffening as Hannibal adjusts to the idea. No, it's just easy, and that is such a foreign thing. But it's always been strangely easy with Hannibal. Nobody else has ever gotten this close, let alone so quickly and so effortlessly. Not even Katz.

Will shifts to curl up against him, eyes heavy.

"Thank you," he mumbles, words muffled by Hannibal's chest, where Will tucks his head. He can hear Hannibal's pulse so strongly. It is slow and steady and relentless, and Will drifts in its rhythm.

Will doesn't slide into sleep so much as he's pulled under by it.

Hannibal marks the moment, the subtle change of pulse and breath, of lips softening and the stubborn line between his dark brows smoothing. He doesn't move immediately, but waits, watching the thin band of sunlight that spills between the curtains shift across the wall, over the chair in the corner. It's facing the bed because even after several years, he'd never thought to move it— *Miriam Lass had needed to be watched that first night, in case the cocktail of drugs he'd given her slowed her respirations to a standstill*.

Only when a good twenty minutes have passed does he allow himself to rest his cheek against Will's curls and let Will's smell wash over him— *the heavy scents of skin and sweat and soap, the hot-metal smell of the Mark, an edge of something fever-sweet that he doesn't immediately recognize*.

He drags his thumb against Will's bottom lip, pushes the edge of the digit just far enough to feel teeth— *wondering how many indulgences he can steal from this moment.*

Hannibal lays lax fingers across Will's throat and moves his other hand to cover Will's nose and mouth. He holds, not terribly hard. And waits, not terribly long, until he feels the rise and fall of an involuntary swallow under his touch.

— *at least this one more; he wants to explore Will's body in every way he can* —

He disentangles himself carefully from Will and arranges him on his side, forearm under his head, before slipping silently out of the room.

Hannibal shuts the door with a soft click. He doesn't lock it.

Just as he's gathering Will's clothes from the bathroom into a sack, the doorbell rings. He finds the bag-wash boy at the door and sends the coats, sack of bloody clothes, other assorted laundry, and a hefty tip off with him. He is still careful to wash his own killing clothes, a process that often feels like returning to medical college, where all students were responsible for their own surgical smocks— *then again, he has never been unfamiliar with cooking, cleaning, and caring for himself.*

With the afternoon stretching empty and enticing out before him, Hannibal luxuriates in preparing items for dinner. Dough, already proofed, goes into the oven. Vegetables get scrubbed, chopped, and set covered in a cool corner of the larder. He mixes and grinds sausage filling— *adding the last leftover bit of a tailor's assistant*. As he stuffs, snips, and ties off individual links, he keeps an ear out for any creaking floorboards or footsteps upstairs.

If Will is sleepwalking, he's impressively silent about it.

While the bread bakes, Hannibal sets everything back into the larder for later and heads through the drawing room towards his small office. Before he can step foot past the door, a trickle of cold slips down his spine. He goes still.

The house is utterly quiet around him.

Hannibal slides the scalpel from his pocket and wheels around. Ice blooms on the blade and the handle, frosts his fingers in white. He grips tight even as his fingers burn—*and puts the pain away in an instant*. Darkness, a living twisting thing, boils out of the fireplace across the room towards him, sluicing across the floor. Something moves inside it, shaking itself free, congealing out of the bitter-cold shadow slowly plunging the drawing room into the dark.

He draws closer. Under his collar, the Mark is a freezing weight against his skin.

The antlers come first, a massive inky sprawl— *twenty-five points? thirty? forty?* They're patchy in places where blank eyes stare sightlessly out at the world, translucent as those on Will's doubles. Hannibal stares, transfixed, as the creature writhes its way from the hearth, one hoof and then the other. A headless hunch of a corpse, sinuous and bent back on itself with an endless span of spine, drags its haunches out of the fire, its hindlimbs not hooves but bent elbows ending in human hands that leave scorch marks on his carpet.

He doesn't recognize it, but he knows its voice. Has heard it in the dark before.

Two of you. And you seem to be getting along, the Unnamed murmurs as the blackness swallows the room. *Usually you see fit to kill each other.*

"Too many of the Marked internalize what the world says about them," Hannibal says. "Believe something for so long it begins to sound like your own voice whispering in your ear."

You would know about that, wouldn't you? Whispering. It's been your modus vivendi for quite some time now.

The closer it lurches, the more Hannibal's Mark screams. He tugs everything away from his neck, but all the air seems to have vanished. The dark is suffocating and piercing cold.

"Suggestion is hardly the only thing I take pleasure in," he says. "Or are even you limited in your sight?"

I see enough.

Hannibal tries to breathe but it shrivels in his lungs. "Are you, in this very moment, seeing or whispering? Observing or participating?"

The Unnamed staggers to a halt in front of him, expectant, as if he should be cowering. Its antlers stretch out around him, a prison, and brush against his shoulders, sleeves, the sides of his head. Two tines caress his wrists with the sharp, hot sensation of blood welling to the surface.

Action and will are not so simple. Not even mere whispers, it hums. *Participation is often the price of sight.*

"Participation, then," Hannibal chokes out, but he maintains a stranglehold on his calm. "This is a message."

In a blink, it rears upwards. Tines catch, wrench, and split the pale skin of Hannibal's wrists, clean and bloodless. His veins writhe molten gold in wet, pinked flesh and push out from the wound, curving, twining into antlers, branches, trees.

Wrong on both counts, it answers. *Consider it a nudge.*

Its voice sounds like a smile. The blackness vanishes and lights spills back into the room.

Hannibal is on the ground. More accurately on his knees, hunched over, wrists spilled open in long, deep slits. Clean, at least. The scalpel, tossed aside, is red with blood. His blood. Everything is dark with it —*hands, arms, nailbeds, the carpet.*

He's put the pain far away, but it creeps back in, a strangling fog. He has to get up.

He presses his palms into the carpet and tries to push himself up. A fresh wave of blood slips down his wrists and through his fingers. The drawing room tilts and tilts and goes sideways.

And stays that way.

Will doesn't dream. But he does wander.

It's a blank spot in his brain. There is no sense of time passing or physical movement, of comfort or discomfort. One moment, he is dozing against Hannibal. Then he is alone, but not afraid. And then—

And then he is in the kitchen.

He can smell bread in the oven, and below that, a myriad of other notes that say Hannibal was here, was *just* here. But he isn't here. Will looks around, disoriented. The bedroom door —Hannibal had intended to lock it.

Hannibal wouldn't have forgotten.

Will is in the kitchen, and he smells—

Blood?

Yes, blood. Fresh blood. His chest aches, tingles, and then the Mark flares to life. Blood and darkness surround him, and he looks down, half expecting to see a bloody knife clutched in his hand and Hannibal dead at his feet.

He's alone. There's no knife. The blood is not in the kitchen, but it isn't far away. He stumbles as he takes his first step, head muzzy from the laudanum, but not enough to take him to the ground or distract him.

He follows the smell to the drawing room.

Hannibal lies slumped on the floor, halfway between the fireplace and the couch, covered in blood. Will is running to him before he can think or wonder or look for hidden dangers. His Mark burns; his brain howls.

He will not let Hannibal be taken from him.

"Hannibal!" he calls and drops to his knees at the man's side. He gets out of his shirt quickly, seizes the bloody scalpel from the floor, uses it to slash the fabric. The shirt splits cleanly and he grabs one of Hannibal's arms, binding quickly. "Hannibal, can you hear me?"

Nothing, nothing, and Will wants to *shake* him, but then—

“I can,” Hannibal rasps.

Triumphant panic thunders through him, at a higher pitch than his earlier terror. He’s not too late. He can still fail, but he hasn’t failed before he even arrived.

“Stay with me, Hannibal,” he says, and looks into the other man’s unfocused eyes for as long as he can spare. One second. Maybe two.

One wrist tightly bound now. Will has limited anatomical training, enough to understand the mechanics of death and murder, and he knows enough to drag Hannibal to the couch and prop the arm up along the cushion, above his heart. Hannibal’s body is half-limp and a month ago his weight may have slowed Will, but it doesn’t now. Not while the Mark hums so loud in his ears.

He starts in on the other wrist.

“Who should I call?” he asks, not expecting much of a response, but hoping. “Dr. Bloom?”

He wants to think she could be trusted with the secret of Hannibal’s Mark, but he knows that isn’t true. Knows that hiding it would be difficult. Impossible?

Fuck, Hannibal’s Mark is already on full display. Why? *No time for that now.*

“*No*,” Hannibal manages, blinking up at Will blearily.

No, not Dr. Bloom. And there’s no other doctor Will could raise easily or quickly, and he can’t risk leaving Hannibal alone. Which leaves just him, and he can hope that he’s done enough, now that both arms are bound and raised up, but it doesn’t look like enough.

It looks like Hannibal is far away.

His Mark throbs, and before he can consciously summon it, there is a shadow of himself on the couch, taking Hannibal’s arms from him, applying pressure. It meets his eyes. Will at first doesn’t recognize it, and then—

Abel Gideon, Chilton’s delusional patient, who believes he is the Ripper and recently killed a nurse; still alive, still imprisoned, but formerly a prominent surgeon.

Oh.

Maybe Will doesn’t need anybody else.

His doubles know how to fight in ways he doesn’t, in ways he sometimes hasn’t even witnessed firsthand. Is it possible that this one has the skills to help?

His reflection doesn’t answer. Will can only trust this variant of himself to care for Hannibal or banish what he is not certain he can control. A week ago, he would have feared it.

Now, he just presses a hand to Hannibal's Mark, feels his own flare in echo, and leans in to tell himself:

"Keep him well."

And then, bare-chested and blood-soaked, he staggers to his feet. They need supplies. He has to believe his double can use them.

He finds Hannibal's bag in the hall, still well-stocked. A minor blessing. He loses precious seconds sorting through it, then gives up and takes the whole thing back to the drawing room. The sight is staggering again, and this time, his gaze sweeps over the whole room.

He sees the scalpel again, bloody and abandoned near where he found Hannibal collapsed.

He sees no sign of anybody else but himself and Hannibal.

Suicide?

It makes even less sense than an attack; if Hannibal had a death wish, he'd have turned himself over to the Inquisitors long ago—and right at this second, he has bread in the oven. Not the actions of a man about to slit his own wrists. Will pushes the thought away as he goes to his knees before the strange tableau of Hannibal, wan and bloodied, in the coal-black arms of an image of Will. He offers the bag with shaking hands.

He wants to be confident. He is only desperate.

The double has no desperation or fear, only arrogance and certainty. It accepts the bag and passes the weight of Hannibal back to Will. Will cradles him close as his double finds a needle and thread, prepares it, takes one arm. It unbinds the makeshift bandage a few inches at a time, keeping pressure as it sutures. Will watches, entranced.

"Stay with me," he murmurs into Hannibal's ear, when he realizes the man doesn't flinch at each punch of the needle.

Hannibal stirs. Says nothing, but that hitch in his breath, the twitch of his eyelid—it's enough.

They rearrange in unspoken coordination so that the double can stitch the other arm. Will stares at the neat row of mattress sutures, marvels at their perfection, quails at the fragile humanity of the man he holds.

He murmurs a string of nonsense into Hannibal's ear and strokes his hair. Hopes that he is resting and not sinking further and further away. When the last stitch is set, Will's double simply looks down on both of them, unspeaking as all the others have been. No care regimen provided, no reassurances for the patient.

You can go now, Will says, a gentle nudge with the Mark following to disperse it.

It remains.

Will's breath catches, and he tries again, harder. This time, the figure wavers. Before it can disappear into bloodless shreds, Will hears a voice in his head: his voice but not his cadence.

You owe me, it says. *And I take payment in answers.*

None of his doubles have ever spoken, and Will stares for a long time, before whispering, "What answer do you want?"

Who am I? it whispers back.

And then it's gone.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

He takes a small step closer. "Do I belong to you, Will?"

Will doesn't look away. His fingers tighten on his neck, clutching at it.

"I want you to," he says, finally, nearly voiceless. Like a loud whisper, as if he's saying something he knows he shouldn't be. "Is that what we're doing?"

--

Hannibal takes a bath, and leaves a mark.

The first thing Hannibal notices when he wakes is warmth at his back.

Then slow, tickling little breaths past his ear —*and then he's overwhelmed by the smell of Will; soap and blood and just barely sweet*. He doesn't open his eyes, but tries to move an arm, a hand.

As soon as Hannibal stretches his fingers, dull throbbing pain flares all the way up to his shoulder. He makes a low noise of discomfort and twists his head to the side, finally pulling his eyes open to see afternoon light streaming through the drawing room windows. The breaths by his ear huff to a sudden stop.

"Back with me?" Will murmurs. He shifts against Hannibal until his face comes into view, only just. The line between his brows is deeper than ever.

Hannibal's throat clicks when he swallows. "Reasonably."

"Can you—" Will breaks off, looks down at Hannibal's fingers as he, stiffly, tries to move them again. "How much does it hurt?"

Hannibal has never quite known how to quantify pain, how to map it onto a recognizable scale with depth and relatively, how to pour it into someone else's measuring cup to see how much it fills —*he can withstand a great deal but that hardly dampens the feeling of it, the reality of it.*

"I'm alright. Or, I will be," he says and tilts his gaze down to look at his arms. Blood, drying; matching lines of dark sutures on either wrist, both nearly two and a half inches long. Precise, calculated, not a single stitch missed —*and not just through the skin, the muscle as well*. "This is surgeon's work. Not keeping a medical degree from me are you, Will?"

At that, Will manages a flicker of a smile *—that soon folds under, tucks into a frown with neat hospital corners, difficult to pull out again—* and shakes his head.

“I can’t sew a hem, let alone…” Two fingers skim lightly along Hannibal’s forearm, close to but not touching the perfect stitches.

“It was not your hands that laid these,” murmurs Hannibal.

“No, not exactly,” Will confirms. “But it turns out methods of killing aren’t all my doubles have absorbed. The skill comes entirely from somewhere else, and I couldn’t do it again myself, even now.”

Will pulls back, but only long enough to ease him up and back against the couch directly. Hannibal blinks, long and slow. The pain is enough to make his mind sluggish as he puzzles through this new information. When he comes back to himself, Will is in front of him, taking both of his hands.

“What happened?” Will asks, all hesitant gentleness.

Hannibal watches him, gathering his thoughts and trying to read the finer points of Will’s expression. Relief shines plainly out from his face, as does worry and no small amount of curiosity *—and in some way, Will looks bereft, looks at him like Will is seeing something in an entirely different light; it could benefit him, to lean into the pain, for him to guide Will to imagine he is unveiling a hidden vulnerability.*

“An aspect of the Mark we have yet to discuss.” Hannibal leans his head back as much as he can. He lets his voice go a little rougher and thinner. “First, though, the sutures should be wiped down. In my medical bag, you’ll find a bar of carbolic soap and a set of white cloths. You’ll need the bar and two cloths, as well as a bowl of hot water.”

“Of course. I can do that.”

He tries to brush his thumb over Will’s, but even that movement elicits a ribbon of pain that makes his lip curl.

After a moment, he adds, “Would you pull the bread out of the oven?”

Will blinks. “Shit. Forgot about the bread. I’ll be right back. Don’t—don’t move, or—will you be safe on your own?”

Hannibal nods and watches him get to his feet. Will is naked from the waist up, yet again, barefoot and blood-streaked—*yet again*—and Hannibal’s gaze idly follows him until he disappears into the kitchen. He listens to the sink turn on in the distance and the sounds of Will moving in the kitchen, his Mark pulsing dully, like a taunt, or a reminder. He can still feel his veins reaching up out of his skin, slick and shining.

Will returns in stages — bowl first, then rags and soap and medical bag — and then kneels beside Hannibal, holding out the cloths. Expectant.

“Next?” Will says.

Truthfully, Hannibal could do any of this alone *—if needs must, as often they do—* but with a foggy whisper of surprise, he realizes Will's concern is oddly charming *—more than that, if he looks closely at it, but he's in no position to look closely at it right now.*

He realizes he's been looking at Will for a little too long.

"Wet the first rag and work the soap into a lather," Hannibal says quietly. "One side of the cloth per arm, only patting the sutures and the edges of the wounds. Then wet the second and do the same."

Will follows direction as admirably as any surgical dresser. He works slow and steady, as thorough as he can be without agitating the wounds. Hannibal savors the attention, Will's closeness and the smell of him under acrid blood, the gentle thoroughness and intent of his hands. In this, Will is honest *— though if Will were angling for something, he would relish it just as much*. Hannibal gently curls and flexes each finger in turn, noting the pressure and pain each individual movement elicits. A map of usability, a gauge of damage.

As Will wipes the second warm cloth over Hannibal's skin, washing away the soap, he clears his throat. "It was just us in the house, wasn't it?"

—he had been wondering how long it would take Will to ask—

"You're asking if I did this to myself," Hannibal says, no judgement in his voice *—just the careful measure of pain he allows himself to feel, allows to seep into his words; he won't thank himself for it now, but it's in the spirit of potentially reaping future rewards*.

Will ducks his head. "Yes. That's what I'm asking."

He keeps his gaze as calm and steady as he can, though he feels somehow distant. "Suicide is the enemy. And moreover, I have no strong desire to die."

Not with Will here. Not when he still doesn't know what Will tastes like. Certainly not before he has the chance to see Will's darkness on display for himself. And he thinks Will believes him, if the persistent relief still floating at the edges of his expression is anything to go by.

But Will doesn't comment on it, simply finishes cleaning Hannibal's arms. He sets the second cloth in the bowl, along with the first. "Bandages next?"

Hannibal nods at the bag beside him. "Firm, but not too tight. The skin needs to breathe."

Will is just as careful with the bandages, precise in the way he cradles Hannibal's wrist, wraps strips of fabric neat and even and just hard enough. His touch is warm and rough. Hannibal's lips part around a noiseless breath as Will presses the first bandage firm over his sutures *—deliberate still, a calculated show of human fragility, but that doesn't mean he doesn't feel it.*

He is quiet for a long moment before asking, "What do you know about where the Marks and their power come from?"

“Only what the Inquisitors claim, which I thought we’d discarded as…small-minded,” Will says, settling the bandages more gently now. Hannibal wishes he wouldn’t, but his mouth does curve into a little smile at *small-minded*. “That the Unnamed brands its chosen harbingers of chaos and cruelty with its Mark, which, if they’re not already murderously insane, swiftly makes them so, while also giving them inhuman abilities.” He glances up, and all Hannibal can think is *blue*. “I assume, since you asked, that there’s actually some truth to it?”

“Some,” he agrees. “The Marks and the abilities they give us do come from a source, and it is true that no one knows what to call it. *The Unnamed* is more a term of convenience; giving a name to the nameless makes it real, makes it an entity that can be blamed for humanity’s ills. But it isn’t an entity or a being in the way we are beings. It is a force. It doesn’t bring disorder; it *is* disorder. Cruelty, on the other hand, is a gift humanity has given itself.”

Absently, Will pauses bandaging long enough to touch the Mark on his own chest. “And today?”

“I spoke with it.”

Will’s hands still on the final bandage. He stares back at him, the plain concern on his face now fighting with confusion and no small amount of horror. Hannibal feels a strange tug, a fleeting knee-jerk impulse to comfort him.

“You— *spoke* with it? With the Unnamed?” Will ties off the bandage, but doesn’t let go, just takes both of Hannibal’s hands again, instead *—he doesn’t need to be comforted, but he lets Will do it all the same; Will touching him feels like an honor, a hard-won trust.* “Has this happened before?”

Hannibal squeezes Will’s fingers lightly. Will is looking at him, intensely, searching his face *—he desperately wants to know for what.*

“Three times,” he answers. “Though this was far more pointed of a visit. It has a way of distorting reality. Transference. Transmutation. It took my scalpel for its antlers, put me somewhere else and cut me open.”

“Induced hallucinations? Or your own possession turned back on you? Hannibal—” Will’s expression tightens, distraught. “Was it this disastrous, the other times?”

Disastrous. If nothing else, this is the first time it has ever truly hurt him. The first visit was snow and starving and empty night; the second a meal, elegant and long overdue; and the third, two years earlier, had been the only time someone very clever had followed the trail of the Ripper to its natural end and found Hannibal there.

“Not in the same way.” He considers the bandages. “It isn’t evil, though it’s often destructive. This time, I believe it was curious to see what would happen.”

—he isn’t sure if that his own curiosity displaced, a human motive grafted onto something unknowable in a vain attempt to understand it—

Will glances down at his own chest, at the Mark, and says, “It knew I was here, didn’t it?”

“It did,” Hannibal answers. “Though I don’t believe it came for you specifically.”

“The Unnamed is what I saw in my dream, wasn’t it?” Will doesn’t look up. “The stag. It wasn’t out of my own subconscious at all.”

“Yes and no. I don’t imagine it has a true form, not in a way we can perceive or understand. I’ve seen it three times, and it’s never looked the same,” he explains —*without mentioning that it has always had antlers, wearing them or bearing them; it’s a curious thing to be mirrored between them, having harts in common*. “What you saw was yours. The Unnamed formed it, out of pieces it found in your mind.”

There is so much to understand about the Unnamed —*or more accurately to wonder over*— but it feels just as important to make Will understand what it *isn’t.* To nudge Will towards understanding that the darkness in him is his and his alone.

Hannibal straightens up with a soft noise of discomfort and Will reaches out to steady him. The unsteadiness is not a ruse, not part of his calculated efforts.

He forces himself to focus on Will. “It doesn’t drive anyone insane.”

Will isn’t sure he believes that. “No. Just manipulates them into slitting their own wrists. Much more polite.”

He could have lost Hannibal, all for something’s *curiosity*. The thought burns in him, makes him want to rage, but there’s no space for that. Not when Hannibal is barely able to sit, not when the rug below them is still soaked with blood. Hannibal is alive, and needs him.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” he says. “I, uh. Ruined the shirt you leant me trying to get the bleeding to stop.”

Hannibal huffs out a quiet, amused noise. “It feels as if we’ve only just left the bathtub.”

Will snorts, then chances a look down at himself. He’s once again covered in blood, and he’s not sure if it being Hannibal’s is better or worse than it being Miss LeBeau’s. *Better*, a quiet voice whispers. *Better than it should be*.

When Will glances up, Hannibal’s eyes gleam. “I don’t begrudge the shirt its fate. Rest assured that neither of us will be relegated to eating dinner in the nude.”

“Maybe some other night,” Will says, half-joking even as he does his best not to imagine it. He’s saved by Hannibal shifting to one side and trying to get a knee under himself; Will moves to get an arm around him as they both try to rise.

Will has the easier time of it, certainly, but he is still not entirely recovered. Eventually, they manage to get upright, and make their way slowly out of the drawing room and up the stairs once more.

"You should probably eat sooner than dinner. Do you want me to bring the bread up once you're settled?" he asks, needing some kind of plan.

“Yes, Will,” Hannibal says. Then, a little more roughly: “Thank you.”

Will steers them both back towards the washroom for the second time that day and Hannibal allows himself to be eased down onto the towel chest under the window. Will gets the water running at a decent temperature—not so finely calibrated as Hannibal had earlier, but warm enough—before turning back to Hannibal.

He’s fumbling with the line of buttons on his waistcoat, as if unable to grasp them.

It's strange, to see the man struggle. Uncomfortable. But his hands must ache terribly, so Will goes to him, taking over with a soft, "Here, let me."

He gets the waistcoat undone, and the shirt beneath, but stops short of pushing them off. He's never seen Hannibal this undressed outside of dreams, and his eyes catch on the Mark.

"Can you manage the rest, do you think?"

Hannibal gives him a slow nod, hands moving to his trousers, and says, “Yes, though if we’re not taking dinner naked, I’m going to need clean clothes. Something without too many fasteners or buttons. My bedroom is on the upper floor.”

“I can do that,” he says, though a part of him wants to object. The idea of trespassing into Hannibal’s bedroom, unaccompanied—

But Hannibal needs him to do it.

He hesitates another moment, then goes to the tub to check the depth of the water. Maybe halfway there. Hannibal can handle it, or call him in to handle it.

“I’ll come right back down,” he says. “If you need me, call.”

But after he exits the bathroom, he lingers, staying close enough that he can hear the rustle of Hannibal’s clothing faintly over the water. Then nothing, and Will tries not to worry. Comes close to pacing.

When Will hears the tap turn off, he breathes a sigh of relief. No need for him, then.

The staircase up to the third floor looms, and for a moment, Will considers going down, instead. Hannibal needs the bread cooling on the counter as much as he needs clean clothes. But Hannibal has made a direct request, and Will can’t stay no to him.

He climbs.

The lighting is as bright in this part of the house as any other, but the walls are paneled in rich, deep wood, and the runner is in a muted pattern of navy, black, and cream. The curios here are less ostentatious (though no less strange) than the ones on the ground floor.

Hannibal's hand, everywhere. Will breathes in, and tastes the cologne he's come to know well, following the edge of it to what must be Hannibal's bedroom. He pauses, just outside the door, one hand on the finely-planed wood.

He's welcome here, at the heart of Hannibal's house.

The room, when he enters it at last, is... *expansive*. Bigger than any bedroom needs to be, and bigger too than its fireplace can reasonably heat in the depths of winter. Every inch of it is infused with Hannibal, from the depths of the wallpaper to the rich bedding crowning the broad mattress. Will's skin pebbles into gooseflesh as he crosses the plush rug to the closet, feeling even more like an intruder, unwanted and unfit. There is blood drying along his collarbone. The room's master lies a floor down, weak and humbled.

Will touches each piece of clothing as little as possible, until he finds what Hannibal has asked for.

Then he flees.

He carries his prize carefully away from his stained flesh as he descends past the bathroom, down to the kitchen. There's bread there. Bread that Hannibal will need. If he focuses on the tasks, he doesn't have to feel the enormity of the trust behind them, and, well—

Well, this is all too much. So much. They have crossed some kind of threshold, and Will is not prepared.

He's just returned to the bathroom door when he hears Hannibal call, "Will. I could use your help." His voice is quieter, perhaps embarrassed, when he adds, "Please."

Will really hopes that was the first time Hannibal called for him.

"Of course," he says, and eases the door open, boule and clothing awkwardly in hand. He tries not to look directly at Hannibal, and fails miserably.

The man is only waist-deep in water, leaning back in the tub with his bandaged arms draped over the rim. His chest and throat are entirely exposed, and it's wrong to think he's beautiful right now, blood-streaked, pale, and weak.

That doesn't keep Will from thinking it.

Hannibal cocks his head and blinks. He looks from Will, to the bread, back to Will.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he says. He nods down at the white swathes wrapped tight around his forearms. "It only occurred to me that keeping these dry while washing may be an impossible task. I can do it myself, if it would make you uncomfortable—you need only be ready to change out the bandages when I'm done."

He lets his eyes slip shut, as if to give Will the privacy to make that decision. Or to hide his own humiliation.

"I—no, I can help," Will says, quickly. "Just…hang on."

He should not have detoured for the bread. He feels ridiculous, holding it, but Hannibal will need to eat. Eventually.

He stashes it on the windowsill, along with the clothing, then goes to the side of the tub by Hannibal's shoulders. The water is pink, but still clear. And really far too low. Will trains his eyes on the other man's face.

Hannibal's eyes open. Their gazes meet. A tired smile, almost tender, tugs at Hannibal's lips.

"Any preferences?" Will asks, voice soft.

It's strange, having their positions reversed so thoroughly in just a few hours. He feels as if he's looking in a mirror.

"Aim to get all the blood, if you can," Hannibal says. "If there's anything you wish to avoid, I won't hold it against you."

Will huffs a soft laugh. "Got it."

He takes a moment first to clean himself up at the sink. He got most of the blood off his hands earlier, but there's more on his arms and chest. No point to cleaning Hannibal off only to undo all that work an instant later.

Then he starts in on Hannibal with a fresh cloth. He's gentle but thorough, just as he was when cleaning the suture sites. He focuses at first on Hannibal's chest and arms, the parts closest to him and least distracting, and the work of it keeps his mind from wandering too much over the breadth of Hannibal's shoulders, the elegant lines of lean muscles under his hands. The water in the tub is hot enough to blot out the heat from Hannibal's skin, the patter of droplets falling back to the tub at least as loud as his breathing. The scent of soap begins, at last, to overpower the sharpness of the blood, and Will finds himself tucked up behind Hannibal, cheek pressed to the crown of his head as he leans forward to swipe at a patch of blood lower on his abdomen.

"This okay?" he murmurs.

"Yes. I don't embarrass easily," Hannibal says, eyes now heavy-lidded with languor. He twitches a finger on either hand with a small breath. "You saved my life, Will."

And that makes you mine, Will thinks, unbidden.

He pulls away, but only enough to unstopper the tub so that the water can drain. He also starts the tap again. The water won't fully change over, but it will keep Hannibal from getting too cold. All he can see from this angle are Hannibal's feet.

"I'm only glad I found you in time," he says, voice pitched above the splash of the water. "And glad you forgot to lock me in the bedroom. I was sleepwalking, you know. We got lucky."

He slides the plug back into place, then levers himself back to where he started. He scans Hannibal's face for—something. Some confirmation that he's really okay. That this soft

turnabout is real. That they're here, together.

"There are a great many things in this world that are fundamentally random. Coincidence, alive and well," Hannibal says. "I don't believe you were lucky to find me. I think you found me just in time."

"Just in time," Will repeats. His pulse thunders in his ears, drowns out all his self-consciousness, all his hesitance. "Something in you called to me, and I came."

Hannibal's face is normally so difficult to read, but something raw and relieved steals over his expression and he says, "*Will*."

It's the easiest thing in the world to lean in and kiss him.

Will tries to be gentle, and fails immediately. One of his hands clutches at Hannibal's shoulder, and he makes a soft, desperate noise as he shuffles closer to the tub.

They're both together. They're both *alive*, and still somewhat in control of themselves, and the relief makes him shudder.

Hannibal makes a soft noise, maybe of pain, but Will swallows it down. And then Hannibal is sitting forward, bathwater sloshing, fingers digging into Will's hair. He pulls him closer. Will has to catch himself against the edge of the tub. The washcloth drops into the water. He groans, lips parted, teeth hungry. And Hannibal matches him at every step, violence for violence.

His Mark flares with delight, and Will's hand shifts to rest against the front of Hannibal's throat. But the touch is enough to remind him of exactly what horrors brought them this far, and he pulls back, panting.

"You'll hurt yourself," Will gasps. "Stop—let me—" and he squirms away just enough to turn off the tap. The water's almost too high.

Hannibal doesn't let him go far, skims his lips across Will's jaw. "Will I?" he murmurs and adds teeth. Just a graze. "I don't see you being overly gentle."

But he is merciful, and pulls away.

Will shivers, hand clutching at the tap knob tightly. His throat bobs. He has very little self-control left.

"You will if you keep moving your arms around," he points out, and lets go of the tap. It takes all his effort to get up and dry his hands, then fetch the bread. He tears open the loaf, then brings a piece back.

"Here. We agreed you needed to eat."

He plucks a soft morsel from the very center and holds it to Hannibal's lips.

Will can't look at him directly, can't chance meeting his eyes, but Hannibal opens his mouth. His teeth just brush Will's fingertips as he takes the bread. Chews. Swallows. Will should pull his hand away. He doesn't, and Hannibal's lips touch the tips of his fingers again.

"We did," Hannibal says, and there's an edge of exhaustion in his voice. Concession, maybe, if he is even capable of that. "May I get out of the bath first?"

Will's cheeks heat slightly. It's a reasonable request, but after a moment's consideration, he shakes his head.

"No." He tears another piece for Hannibal, holds it once more to his lips. "Let me take care of you, at least until this piece is gone."

It has the added bonus of enforcing a little bit of distance between them. If Hannibal's mouth is otherwise occupied, Will can't kiss him, and he can't provoke.

Well, provoke *as much*.

This time, when he takes the bread, he presses teeth into Will's nail. A warning.

"You may feed me all the bread you like," Hannibal says after he swallows. "But not here."

With that, he grips the sides of the tub and stands up.

Will drops the bread.

Hannibal is thoroughly untroubled by nudity, his own or anyone else's, but he's learned that this sentiment is not widely shared.

Apparently not by Will Graham, even, who seems caught between scrambling to his feet in order to catch a hold of and steady him, and staring at the full length of Hannibal's body. Eventually, he seems to make a decision and averts his eyes.

"Point taken," Will manages, sounding more than a little strangled.

Hannibal steps out of the bath and around him, reaching for a towel to tie around his waist — *rolling it to stay up feels like a knife taken to the wounds all over again, his tendons on fire.* He doesn't, however, break stride, and lets himself bite off a groan in pain. "Take it back downstairs," he says. "It can wait."

Will's still not looking at him. "Are you okay to get dressed on your own?"

Hannibal isn't sure if Will sounds more embarrassed or longing.

He gives him a look —*and softens as much of it as he can with pain and the very present weariness starting to creep its way in.* "I can manage."

Will leaves, almost as quickly as he had fled to retrieve Hannibal's clothing.

And Hannibal manages. He's gentle with the bandaged wounds and slips on the old work shirt Will had found, with wide enough sleeves not to constrict and a laced collar in lieu of buttons. The trousers, likewise, are worn but serviceable, and easily fastened. After dressing, he eases himself onto the towel chest and works on putting much of his pain behind walls — *in cages and boxes and anywhere else it will go until he runs out of room.*

He opens his eyes to dull, persistent aching. Certainly manageable long-term.

But though it's taken several long minutes, and though Hannibal waits several more, Will does not reappear. Perhaps that last stunt tore through Hannibal's veneer of vulnerability, despite Will seeming to believe it until that point *—if he's honest with himself, and he always is, he's thoroughly uncertain what Will does believe*. Hannibal eases himself from his perch and makes his way downstairs, to the kitchen.

And there he finds Will, leaning against the counter, gazing down at the mangled bread loaf. He is clearly deep in thought, so Hannibal lingers just outside the doorway. From this angle, he can only just make out the lines of Will's face, but he appears troubled. Hannibal almost speaks up, but a flicker of anger suddenly blooms across Will's face, tightening his jaw and pulling at his brows.

—there is always an clean, simple beauty to Will Graham; it quickly becomes luminescent with the slightest hint of anger or rage or violence—

Hannibal will never get his fill of it, but after a moment, he does cross the last several steps into the doorway loud enough to announce his presence. Will blinks and that rage falls away. He looks up with a sheepish smile.

Hannibal steps forward. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Just thinking about other ways this day could have gone," Will admits, lifting a hand to rub at the nape of his neck. He hesitates, something clearly bothering him, then adds, "I think if I hadn't woken up in time to save you, I would have had to figure out how to kill the Unnamed."

It's a statement that should be a joke, should be lighter than it is, but he sounds certain. The weight of that certainty utterly unseats Hannibal. It feels like a delightful, bloody promise: Will Graham, with a monster growing inside him and hands that commit necessary violence, setting himself against chaos, against disorder of itself.

And all for what?

Hannibal isn't even sure it matters because it sounds honest. It sounds like Will.

"Because it would've come for you next?" he supposes.

Will flushes but looks at him anyway. "Because it would have taken you from me. And I can't accept that."

And that is certain too. Will looks like he's holding his breath.

The sudden swell of affection Hannibal feels for this man is staggering, runs so deep it could be mistaken for avarice —*there is a fiercely protective streak to Will's savagery and he aches to know the edge of it, aches to see if it will cut him if he presses too hard.*

He takes a small step closer. "Do I belong to you, Will?"

Will doesn't look away. His fingers tighten on his neck, clutching at it.

"I want you to," he says, finally, nearly voiceless. Like a loud whisper, as if he's saying something he knows he shouldn't be. "Is that what we're doing?"

—*yes*—

Hannibal hears an echo of himself, asking *would you like me to kiss you again, Will?* Remembers the cold emptiness of death that had gripped Will, the moments when it seemed like Will would've liked nothing less than to leave his side —*undoubtedly fostering codependence*.

"Being so near death makes us cling to reminders that we are not alone. That we are alive. Companionship, closeness, sex," he says, watching Will's brow furrow as he tries to sort through this, tries to make sense of it. "But the two of us have many reasons to want all of that from each other. Not just proximity to death."

Will's lips part a fraction, brow unfurrowing, and he closes the gap between them. Lifts a hand and tentatively touches Hannibal's face. "What happens next, then?"

Hannibal takes the hesitant fingers on his cheek —*carefully, so carefully*— and turns Will's palm towards his mouth. He presses a kiss there and then lower, more a breath, on his wrist.

"I believe we agreed I should eat something," he says. "Or you could come upstairs."

"Upstairs," Will breathes. "Dinner can wait."

Hannibal leads. Will follows.

Back upstairs, back past the bathroom, up once more into the sanctuary of the third floor, the hallowed ground that breathes with Hannibal's lungs. Will feels dizzy with relief, with the knowledge that Hannibal is *his* , that this is not a dream or a desperate wish, but reality. He no longer feels like an intruder. He barely feels like a guest. No, he's welcome here. Wanted.

When they reach his bedroom door, Hannibal pauses. Turns to face him, and takes his hand.

"I promise this is better than your kitchen," Hannibal says.

Startled laughter bubbles out of him, and Will steps closer then, close enough to feel Hannibal's breath on his skin. His free hand hovers over Hannibal's shirt, and he realizes he's shaking, just a little. It's been a while since he's done this, and he has never felt this —*on fire*, before. "Are you going to let me help you this time?" he asks.

Hannibal pulls that trembling hand closer, urging, until Will twists his fingers into the fabric.

“Yes,” he says simply.

He’s smiling when he pulls Will inside the room and into a kiss. Soft, at first, pulling away and coming back again. Over and over, deeper and deeper, both of them taking a little more each time. It’s different, kissing Hannibal knowing that it won’t end at just that. This isn’t a frantic moment stolen from their better senses. This is intentional, directional, and as Will grows less desperate, he becomes bolder.

He drags Hannibal’s shirt up and over his head at the first opportunity, and his hands have stopped shaking entirely by the time he reaches for the waistband of the man’s trousers. He nips at Hannibal’s lower lip, then tilts his head back a little to allow Hannibal to *take*.

If he had any remaining reservations that Hannibal didn’t feel the same intensity of longing as he did, it evaporates under his mouth.

Hannibal works a trail of biting, bruising kisses into the sensitive skin of his throat as he tugs Will further into the room. Will is drunk on it, hands clumsy and distracted. He only gets as far as undoing fasteners before he’s pulled onto the bed, astride Hannibal.

He touches Will everywhere, fingers pressing to the ridges of hipbones and tracing patterns up and down his spine, and tastes every inch of his mouth inside and out. All the while, Will’s Mark hums, and he feels it in his fingertips. The answering call of the Mark on Hannibal’s throat makes his eyes heavy-lidded, his tongue ache to trace the lines of it.

Hannibal beats him to it, once more ducking his head to lave over the brand on his chest.

Will’s lips shape a litany of indecorous sounds that grow into a full-throated whine. He tangles one hand tight in Hannibal’s hair, the other clutching desperately at his hip. He tugs at Hannibal’s head, trying to guide it up and back so he can get at his throat.

Hannibal lets himself be pulled up, and leans back just enough. Will surges forward the moment his throat is bared, kissing and nipping at the hollow where the Mark rests. It feels *alive* beneath him, and he groans, lifting his hips as Hannibal reaches into his trousers.

Yes, yes, please, runs through his mind as he reaches down to help tug them off. He can't stand being parted from Hannibal for another second, even if it's only a barrier of cloth. He squirms, artlessly, until he can kick his trousers away. His mouth never leaves the Mark.

It’s Hannibal who gets them further onto the bed, rolling Will onto his back and flattening a hand over Will’s ribs to hold him steady as he pulls away. Will lets him go, though he doesn’t want to.

He’s rewarded by the sight of Hannibal gazing down at him in naked, adoring *want*, and then his mouth descends on the pale scar on Will’s shoulder.

Will curses, the closest he's come to words since entering the room, and finally returns to trying to divest Hannibal of his remaining clothing. It's easier like this; he has more room to

work, and more urgent need. Because being the only one naked now feels unbalanced, in a way that simultaneously thrills him and irritates him.

Hannibal pulls his mouth away from the shoulder scar long enough to let Will help him out of trousers and underclothes. Will catches the barest glimpse of what almost looks like a burn scar, somehow unnoticed in the bath, on Hannibal's leg, and then his attention is pulled back to the bandages on his arms.

"Careful of your wrists," Will pants, because Hannibal is supporting his whole weight on them, and that can't be anything but agony.

Hannibal responds by resting his whole weight against Will's body instead. He grinds against him, skin to skin, and nips at Will's mouth with an amused little snarl.

He murmurs against it, "Are you going to take care of me, Will?"

"I'm trying," Will sighs in return. "Not particularly impressive if I don't take care of what's *mine*."

And at that, he hooks a leg around Hannibal's hip (ignores the perfect friction of it) and rolls them over. He slides his hands to Hannibal's elbows, trying to ease his arms up and over his head. But Hannibal captures Will's hands and redirects them to his throat.

"You already impress me," he says. Every word vibrates against cartilage and tendon and Will's fingers. He brushes stray curls off Will's forehead and murmurs, "Though I'm afraid you'll have to wait your turn."

Wait—

But Hannibal already has him on his back once more, and is pressing him hard into the mattress. Will's hands drop from his throat, reach for his shoulders, but Hannibal is already sinking lower, drawing his tongue down the shadowed valley between Will's ribs. He grabs the sheets instead, to keep himself from stopping Hannibal. He doesn't *want* Hannibal to stop, he's just so full of everything in that moment that he doesn't trust himself. His chest and belly heave, his legs spreading to make room, feet planted on the mattress and pushing down hard to ground himself.

"Feeling greedy?" he asks, more a moan than words. This is so like that first dream that he expects teeth. Blood. Pain that isn't pain at all, but ecstasy. He flexes, presenting more of his belly. "*Hungry?* "

Hannibal, mouth still worshipping the taut lines of Will's stomach, goes very still. He lifts his head, gaze skirting over the soft rise and fall of Will's belly and chest to his face. Their eyes meet, and Will's pulse pounds in his skull, in his chest, in his cock.

And then Hannibal looks away, dragging nose and chin and mouth to nuzzle the soft skin just above Will's navel. He presses a kiss to it like a benediction.

Then he bites hard enough to leave a mark.

It feels *divine* , and Will doesn't know if that's because of the Mark or Hannibal or his own off-kilter brain. That shouldn't feel good in the waking world. It should make him buck Hannibal off, pull away, ask for softer touches. Instead, his head falls back on a helpless, needy groan, and he hooks one leg around Hannibal's waist, as if to keep him where he is. His cock throbs desperately, and he rolls his hips up to rut against Hannibal's chest.

Hannibal holds him down. He soothes his tongue over the crescent welts and lays another bite beside them. Then another. And another until Will has a neat line of Hannibal’s devotion, offerings of his worshipful mouth, across his shuddering belly.

One of them bleeds. Hannibal licks it clean. Will whines.

When Hannibal slides lower, noses in the thatch of sweat-damp curls, Will thinks he might split apart from how much he *wants*. His hands seize at the sheets again, but they aren’t enough to anchor him. Will shifts his grip from the bed to Hannibal's hair. His stomach aches, throbs, he can feel himself bleeding, and he doesn't care. He didn't care before, and he certainly doesn't care now.

He stares, rapt, as Hannibal mouths at his cock as if he’s starving.

(Will should be afraid of teeth, of more pain, and that, too, is impossibly far away.)

He fights not to move, not to rock up into Hannibal's mouth, as he moans his name. Hannibal answers by loosening his grip on Will’s hips entirely and smoothing his hands up his sides. And then he flattens his tongue and takes the whole of him all the way down.

He swallows.

Will curses, sharply, and can't stop from thrusting up into the warm wet of Hannibal's mouth the moment he pulls back. He tries to look, tries to *watch* , he owes it to them both, but the sight is overpowering. He's never going to be able to forget what Hannibal Lecter looks like, mouth filled and cheeks hollowed, gazing up at him with liquid-dark eyes and so much hunger Will could drown in it. Is drowning in it.

For just a moment, it's like Will can slip through Hannibal's defenses, but that can't be right, because the hunger is beyond anything he's ever known. How could this man, who wants for so little, still hunger this much?

Will drags himself away from what must be his mind misfiring, and instead finds a rhythm that flexes the bruising bites on his abdomen and comes close to but doesn't quite choke Hannibal as Will takes his pleasure. He's not sure how long he can maintain it for; not sure he even wants to try very hard. His voice fills the room, whimpers and groans and breathy gasps.

Hannibal frees one of Will’s hands from his hair and tangles their fingers together.

Their eyes meet, and all Will can see is adoration, and he is lost.

He comes with a strangled cry of, "*Hannibal*," body going rigid, blissfully, inarguably certain that he isn't alone. That he's never going to be alone again. His only coherent thought, in the maelstrom of pleasure and emotion and overwhelm, is that he wishes the bites on his belly would scar.

Hannibal braces a hip with his free hand, swallowing and savoring the taste *—heady, and heavy, the bitter salt-tang that rides the line between earthy and distasteful and like Will, just as impossible to categorize or define.* He slips Will's cock from his mouth and, when Will's legs finally relax and fall blissfully open, he presses a kiss to his thigh.

He can always be gentle in the service of anything that merits it.

Hannibal looks up as a rough little laugh rises from Will, who pushes himself up on his elbows to look down at him with something very close to awe.

"Come here," Will murmurs, reaching out.

He makes his way back to Will's mouth *—more careful this time of his own wrists—* and bites softly on his lower lip, in deep, warm kisses. He restrains himself from moving his hips to chase friction and relief, mindful of the many places Will is sensitive underneath him. He never feels ashamed for taking but even in his bed, he prides himself on courtesy.

He goes where Will takes him, guided to the edge of the mattress, and is rewarded by a nip at his Mark and the singing note that pulses through him. Will presses a last kiss to the hollow of Hannibal's throat before sliding from the bed and going to his knees.

The air vanishes from Hannibal's lungs.

"Only ever done it like this before," Will says, blushing. "Hope that's okay."

It is, of course it is, but Hannibal doesn't have the breath to voice it. From this angle Will is all errant curls and supple limbs, gaze intense under dark lashes. He almost tenses when Will flattens his hand over the puckered, shiny flesh of the burn scar on his upper thigh. And Will glances up at him, a moment of curiosity.

—at that point in time, he'd thought that pain would be easier to put away when inflicted by his own hand; he had been young and desperate enough to believe it, but not so much that it worked—

Hannibal opens his mouth, ready to say something, when Will slides his hand over to take him by the root and give him two languid strokes. The catch of calluses on sensitive skin, as focused and thoughtful as it had been when washing away blood, chase anything he was going to say far from his mind. He lets his head fall back with a long, shuddering breath.

He can't quite clamp down on his shiver when Will's mouth brushes the margin of his scar in a gentle kiss and then doesn't even try when that mouth closes around him, swallowing down one inch, two. A slow, tortuous slide, watching himself disappear between Will's lips, making

short pleased sounds at every exploratory brush of tongue. Will flattens his palms against Hannibal's thighs, stroking gently as he begins to move in earnest.

Hannibal doesn't look away, doesn't close his eyes. How could he?

He groans low in his throat, unbidden, when Will sinks his hips lower to the ground, the better to watch him from under those thick lashes *—slivers of intense blue.* He digs a hand into the curls at the back of Will's head and holds fast.

—Will wants to surprise him—

The thought struggles together in Hannibal's mind with every molten pass of tongue and every brush of his cock along the ridges of Will's hard palate, with every wet *pop* when Will pulls off and catches his breath. Where Hannibal was determined to overwhelm Will immediately, Will seems determined to draw this out, make him delirious with pleasure. He groans *—really more of a snarl—* at the shivering slide of teeth scraping along him, sending shockwaves of pleasure low in his stomach. He looses a hand from Will's hair just long enough to thumb a drop of saliva away from the corner of his lips. Hannibal brings the finger to his mouth and licks it clean.

Will's hands slide up his thighs to his waist *—so like the way he had with Will—* and grip tight, keeping Hannibal still. Will moves away just long enough to take a breath, mouth pink and wet. Hannibal catches his lidded glance *—nothing but blue—* and holds it as Will drops his mouth back to Hannibal's cock and swallows him as far as he can go.

—that's when he knows, more than doubles and darkness and dream hands at his throat—

Will could kill him. And Hannibal would let him.

When he comes, it's the only thing he understands.

The pleasure blots out the pain entirely, if only for a blissful, suspended moment. Hannibal's mind clears to the sight of Will extracting himself from Hannibal's grip *—he'd held too hard; the pain tries to flood back; he doesn't let it.*

Will wipes spend away from his mouth *—did Will swallow it; he doesn't know; he doesn't know anything—* and crawls back into the bed to crowd against him. Will grins and Hannibal can only blink at him, then at the splattering of white on his chest. Will kisses at his jaw but Hannibal intercepts him before he can do it again, catching that mouth in a deep kiss first *— yes, Will did.*

He breaks off the kiss and then leans forward to lick Will's chest clean for good measure.

After, Hannibal settles back against the pillows and skirts his fingers in a lazy circle around the line of bites on Will's stomach, just outside of where the skin is beginning to raise. Another one has started to bleed, sluggish and unhurried as his touch. Will reaches down himself and thumbs at the new line of blood.

"Do you think they'll scar?"

“It’s likely.” Hannibal considers the wounds. “I have ointment that will reduce that chance.”

Will turns his face into Hannibal’s throat. Hannibal doesn’t bother to hide the vicious pleasure that crosses his face when Will breathes two words hot and close against his skin.

“Leave them.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

"Then what is it?" Will wants to sound irritated, but curiosity creeps into his voice all the same. Crawford doesn't usually have two killers for him in a week, let alone two days, so unless he's taken up more mundane murders—

"It's the Ripper," Crawford says.

Will gets in the carriage.

--

The Ripper takes another victim. Will dreams of death. Hannibal has a visitor.

Sated and drowsy, Will stretches out alongside Hannibal. He is halfway to sleep when his mind registers *red*. Not on his belly, but on a field of what should be pristine white cotton. He frowns, reaches for Hannibal's arm. "I told you to watch your wrists."

"You did," Hannibal says. The bastard doesn't even try to sound apologetic. "I can set new sutures. I was a surgeon for many years."

"With one hand?" he asks, shifting just enough that he can lift his eyebrows in question.

"I can suture with either hand." Hannibal gives him a thin smile. "Though I will need to borrow one of yours."

"Consider it at your disposal," Will says, even as he adds that little bit of knowledge to the slowly accumulating codex of facts about Hannibal. It's not surprising, not hard to picture him slick with blood and certain with a blade. In fact, it seems more in his nature than dispensing laudanum and treating fevers.

"Why did you start as a surgeon?" he asks, pressing a kiss to his jaw. "And why did you stop?"

"Art sparked my interest in anatomy but dissecting cadavers and observing surgeries as a student only deepened it. Steady hands make for clean lines with pencils as well as scalpels," Hannibal explains, brushing his fingers against Will's temple. "I left because I killed a patient."

Will turns this explanation over in his mind. The edges feel—wrong. He draws back enough to see Hannibal's face more clearly.

“My understanding is that a great number of surgical patients die. Even with ether and the new antiseptic initiatives. Not just a risk of the profession, but a requirement.”

Hannibal looks past him, almost, but then moves his gaze back and nods. “It is. But this was simply one too many.”

The pieces click: Hannibal is not the type of man to accept failure, not when he gives himself over to a task. Will sits up fully then, reluctant to leave the comfort of Hannibal’s embrace, but mindful of the blood staining Hannibal’s bandages.

“We should take care of the sutures now, before we get distracted again. And eat, finally.”

Hannibal makes a small, unhappy noise at Will’s suggestion.

“We should,” he agrees, sitting forward carefully. He hooks a bent knuckle under Will’s chin and captures his mouth in a lingering kiss. When he finally pulls back, he drags his teeth on Will’s lower lip the entire way. “I made sausages.”

“Of course you did,” Will says, ducking his head to hide both his blush and the snicker that wants to escape. It would be very easy to go in for another kiss, wind himself around Hannibal, sink right back into the mattress—

And it’s flattering, that Hannibal seems so close to doing the same. Wild and wonderful. He lets that knowledge propel him out of bed to retrieve his clothing. Maybe this time he’ll manage to keep it on for more than a few hours. He does pause as he pulls his shirt on, though, looking at the blood on his belly, not quite dry.

He leaves the shirt unbuttoned.

Hannibal, at his side, is able to ease himself back into most of his clothes, draping his shirt over one shoulder, before he leads the way back downstairs. Will, once directed, brings a bowl of fresh, hot water and the medical bag into the dining room, where Hannibal has spread out a cloth at one end of the table. Hannibal unwraps his wrist carefully to reveal three popped stitches.

Will washes his hands, then holds the skin together as Hannibal begins to work. Even left-handed, he easily tweezes out the broken stitches but Will steps in to help when it looks like Hannibal is about to thread the recurved needle with his teeth. The replacement stitches go in quickly after that.

After cleaning and rebandaging, Hannibal sets the suturing equipment aside to wash and presses a hand to the center of Will’s chest.

“Lean back and spread your legs as much as you can.”

Will can’t help his quick little grin at that, but does as he’s told, and he watches Hannibal curiously down the length of his body.

(He wonders if Hannibal will resist the urge for another taste.)

Hannibal tests the edges of the bites, presses firmly. Will hisses, but doesn't flinch away. But when Hannibal leans in and examines them close enough to feel the ghost of his breath, Will shudders, stomach prickling with gooseflesh.

"These will scar nicely," Hannibal says, at last, and leans back. He begins soaping off the outer bite first, clearing away brown-red smears of drying blood. "You may be tempted to peel the scabs to encourage the process, but I recommend you keep your hands off for as long as possible to avoid infection."

"I'll leave any scab-peeling to you, doctor," Will assures him, his voice a little hoarse. He wonders what Hannibal thinks of him, of his need for these marks to remain on his body. He likes it, that much is clear, but how does he understand it?

And how much of his own need is Will soaking up and reflecting Hannibal's pleasure at marking him? (Some, he's sure, but not all. Not even much.)

"I think I prefer this mark," he adds, a little softer. "Over the original."

"Because you choose to wear it?" Hannibal asks. "Or because it is mine?"

"Yes, I think is the answer to that," Will says, blushing. "I also suspect it won't make my nightmares worse."

Hannibal finishes cleaning the row of bites and pats them carefully dry. "I can't promise it won't affect your dreams."

Will's lips twitch, and then he blinks with a delayed realization, and touches the scar on his shoulder. The old mark that is still there despite switching places with the Stammets double in the drawing room the week before.

He really is still himself.

Hannibal nudges Will's hand out of the way and gently moves a finger down the tight, raised flesh. "Knife?"

Will nods. "Long before I ever consulted for Jack, I did a stint as a regular constable. I wasn't particularly good at it." Parts of it, perhaps, but enacting violence was more highly prized than understanding violence; which hadn't gone in his favor. "I was trying to separate a drunkard from a woman he was accosting on the street. I saw the knife, but hesitated. I didn't want to hurt him."

He rolls his shoulder under Hannibal's touch, watching the scar shift below his fingers.

"I didn't realize until just now that it's still there. It seems scars persist after I switch with the doubles, just like the Mark. Though I can't say I've ever looked at my doubles close enough to see if they have my scars in the first place."

"Perhaps you should," Hannibal says with another soft stroke of his thumb over the raised flesh. "Persistence is the nature of scars. They have the power to remind us that the past was real, to anchor us. We all need to be anchored."

He pulls away and encourages Will to sit up straight.

As he winds bandages around Will's middle, he asks, "You didn't hesitate to kill the Shrike in order to save his daughter. And yet, when you were the one attacked, even as you saw the knife, your instinct was not to fight back, but to spare the man who could have killed you."

Will doesn't meet Hannibal's eyes. "Things change."

"Yes." Hannibal doesn't move his hands immediately, his fingers a starburst over Will's stomach. "They do."

For a moment, Will thinks he is going to ask for more. And then he doesn't. The reprieve makes him feel dizzy for just a moment.

The drunkard might have killed him, but he hadn't wanted to. He'd just been—frightened. Hobbs, by contrast, had already killed his wife mere moments before. Budge had a loop of wire around Will's throat. But all of that—it doesn't actually explain the change, the slow, subtle erosion of what had kept Will from killing the man with the knife:

His self control.

And he can't blame that erosion on the Mark. It started well before that night.

Finally, Hannibal pulls back and passes Will his shirt, then stands and nods toward the kitchen. "Would you care to sous-chef?"

Will shrugs into the shirt. "Of course. What's on the menu? Aside from the sausage, I mean."

Hannibal sets the medical kit under the table and heads into the kitchen, and Will follows close behind.

"Braised pork sausage and fennel, dressed with a sherry vinaigrette and toasted, whole peppercorns," he says and then turns to give Will a look, brows raised. "Fresh bread, as well, but I'm afraid that got away from us."

Will flushes. "Only half of it ended up on the floor."

What's left of the loaf is stashed on a bit of counter out of the way, broken side as flush to the surface as possible, right where he'd abandoned it to have his staggeringly possessive realization.

Hannibal follows his line of sight to the salvaged bread and gives him a smile. "Then we have bread as well."

"What would you like me to do?"

He ducks into the larder, and emerges a half a minute later with a platter of ingredients. "I can take care of the sausages, and you will slice the fennel bulbs. If you still insist on taking care of me beyond that, I'll need you to lift plates and pans."

“I do insist,” Will says.

It’s a little like a dance, and Hannibal is, as always, perfectly articulate in his instructions. The simplicity of physical work (because that is what cooking comes down to, in the end) simplifies everything else, and Will finds himself delighting in it.

As he watches Hannibal plate the finished meal, he thinks that he could be very happy like this: spending evenings together with Hannibal and on days apart knowing that the man is as eager to see him as Will is to return. It might even make the murderers in his head easier to set back on the shelf when he isn’t working.

There are still medical supplies to be put in their rightful place and blood slowly but surely permanently staining the rug in the drawing room, but they take their meal to the dining room as soon as it is ready. The food is delicious, leaving Will feeling spoiled and relaxed. Hannibal doesn’t even need to persuade him to stay the night; all it takes is the question.

Will tries not to answer too quickly. But he’s fairly certain that when he agrees, Hannibal knows exactly how happy he is.

His smile certainly is wicked enough, as he leaves the room to retrieve some after-dinner wine.

“Of course, the guest room is always open to you,” Hannibal says when he returns, “but my bedroom also has a lock.”

He holds out the glass in his left hand. Will takes it and lifts it in a quiet thank you.

"The night terrors come with a great deal of sweating." He sips, grimaces. "Not the most attractive quality in a bed partner."

If his next swallow is a little hasty to offset his embarrassment—well, Hannibal probably won't mind.

Hannibal’s eyes track the movement of Will’s throat. Will flushes further. “Sweat or no, I would still rather have you in my bed. If you would have me in turn,” he says.

Yes, yes , he thinks, and nods.

He’s rewarded with Hannibal giving him a long, searing look over the top of his glass. “Finish your wine.”

It’s long after sundown when Hannibal opens his eyes.

Beside him, Will is curled up naked under the sheets, a towel below him at his own staunch insistence. No night terrors have woken him or startled his serene expression. Hannibal just looks, gaze tracing the soft, dark splay of curls on his pillow, the hand half-curled in front of his face, knuckles scraped and yellowed with bruises. He reaches out and holds the back of his hand in front of Will’s nose—*feels slow, even breath tickle his skin*—and then snaps twice, harsh and loud, by his ear. Will doesn’t even stir, deep in the grip of drugged sleep.

Chloral hydrate, slipped into Will's wine. A sedative Hannibal is almost certain is strong enough to prevent sleepwalking and take away Will's dreams entirely. Not to be relied upon for everyday use, but necessary for this.

Hannibal gets up. He changes quickly and quietly and locks the house door behind him.

Securing a place to do his work undetected had been difficult, but learning the nurse's nighttime path from her regular pub to her flat had been simple enough. Hannibal takes side streets to the east side of the city, and when he intercepts her, she's drunk enough not to fight back. No one pays him any heed, as he keeps his face from view and steers a drunken young woman through the back streets— *they never do*.

He takes her liver and severs her tongue at the root. He bleeds her from her femoral artery, and captures enough blood to fill an old milk bottle to the brim. The wounds on his wrists slow him down, but only until he decides to ignore them instead of account for them.

The menu for Frederick Chilton's dinner two evenings from now is simple: pâté on square toasts with rosemary and red pepper jelly, red-wine braised tongue, and a chocolate pudding made with blood and candied citron.

It's well into the night when he finishes his tableau, erected on the riverbank in the shadow of the stone arch of Strathmill Bridge. In this part of the city, the bridges see little foot-traffic until the dockworkers' shift change at dawn. It will take hours for someone to notice. Longer for them to hail the police. Longer still for the news to make it to Jack Crawford.

And then to Will.

Hannibal ducks further into the dark of the bridge to change, stuff his bloodied clothes into a sack to bring with him and slip away unnoticed. He takes the long, circuitous way home, and once back in the hallowed safety of his kitchen, cuts the meat into nondescript slices and sets it and the blood in the icebox. The sack with his clothes goes into the cellar to deal with later. He wipes himself down thoroughly in the washroom so he doesn't reek of blood and sweat and suspicion and fixes the handful of sutures he slipped yet again.

Hannibal brushes a kiss against Will's temple when he slips in bed just before dawn.

The morning is a quick affair, more intimate and less uncertain than their last one together. Will doesn't strictly *want* to leave, but Hannibal has patients, and he has bedrest he should be at least attempting to uphold. Though his anxiety about the Mark is more contained than before, his head still aches intermittently.

As does his belly.

At the door, dressed in his returned clothing (now clean but still stained), Will almost asks if he can see Hannibal sooner than their appointment in three days, then thinks better of it. He's sure Hannibal knows he's thinking it anyway. And he suspects that if he needs Hannibal (*needs* , not wants), his door will be open.

The trip home is faster than before, the path between their houses becoming familiar and well-worn. When he climbs from the carriage Hannibal had called for him, his thoughts are elsewhere, on teeth and bandages and fennel.

But then he spots Jack Crawford waiting on his doorstep. A carriage in his department's livery is parked nearby.

Will slows as he approaches, caught in the force of Crawford's glower.

"Bedrest," Crawford says, flatly.

Will doesn't blush. He just grunts noncommittally and steps around Crawford to unlock his door.

"Dr. Lecter kept me overnight for observation," he bites out.

"And are you cleared?"

"To be in my own home? Yes." He jams the door open and steps inside, giving half a thought to slamming it in Crawford's face. But he doesn't. Will sighs and turns to face him. "If this is about yesterday's killer—"

"It's not. Though I want to talk to you about that, too."

"Then what is it?" He wants to sound irritated, but curiosity creeps into his voice all the same. Crawford doesn't usually have two killers for him in a week, let alone two days, so unless he's taken up more mundane murders—

"It's the Ripper," Crawford says.

Will gets in the carriage.

oOo

A young woman kneels on the riverbank below Strathmill Bridge.

She is nude, bound to a wooden cross to keep her back straight and her arms raised. It’s been long enough since she was murdered that if the ropes were loosed, she’d stay just as she is, suspended in rigor. The pallid, unbruised skin of her abdomen has been carefully severed down the midline, reflected to show the precise knit of muscles underneath, and sewn to her palms. As if she is peeling back her own skin. Her head tips back against the post, throat flush with blood. Flowers with bright yellow stamens burst from her open mouth, their purple petals draped over her lips and chin. Tucked behind her right ear is a single bloom of white clover.

Taken altogether, it is art.

There's no better word for it, though he knows Crawford would hate to hear it. But Crawford is a good fifty feet off, along with Katz and the rest of his investigators. Inquisitors ring the

site at the far edges in their crisp-edged military uniforms and scowling brass masks. Will ignores them.

He steps closer to the body. His shoes aren't made for this much sucking mud, but he barely notices as his trouser legs begin to wick up cold moisture from the ground. His eyes close; in the darkness, a pendulum swings.

He opens his eyes.

Behind the body stands the shadow of the Ripper. Not real, not corporeal; this isn't one of his doubles. But it is pitch black all over and its head is crowned in antlers.

(Antlers, like the stag in his dream. Like the Unnamed.)

The Ripper slips in and out of focus and reality. Will can't see him clearly, but the Mark on his chest flares, undeniable and searing. It is both like and unlike when Hannibal touches him, when they are lost in each other.

He's never seen the killer separate from himself. He always sees through their eyes, even if he does not know the whole of them yet. His jaw quivers with frustration, but then he stills. Will fixes the shadow in his gaze and, as if it *were* one of his doubles, lets their separate awarenesses blur.

"I know my victim, but she does not remember me," he says, not knowing if he speaks aloud or only in the echoing halls of his mind. "This is no murder of passion, but of knowledge. I do not hate her. I do not pity her. She is an animal, and one whose time for slaughter has come."

He reaches out a hand as if to stroke the carefully resected flesh. It slips neatly back into place. Will sees the woman walking home alone the night before, swaying under the influence of drink. He approaches her. Offers help. She's too disoriented from backroom gin to argue. He feels a mild pang of distaste.

"She does not recognize me, but she does accept my aid. I am well-mannered, polite. I lead her home, and allow her to guide us into the narrow alleys that she knows well. She does not suspect me until my hands are around her neck. She collapses, and I work quickly to restrain and move her before she wakes.

"I take her tongue while she is still alive, to muffle her screaming. She still makes noise, but without articulation, nobody in these streets cares. I flense her skin from her muscles, as neatly as any anatomical model. My cuts are without hesitation or uncertainty; I have done this before."

He sees the passes of the knife, and in his mind's eye, the woman's abdomen looks somehow fuller than in death. He slips the blade in between two muscles, just below the ribcage.

"I take something else," Will says, mind spinning between associations, butcher shops and crime scene drawings and autopsies, until he finds the bit of knowledge he needs. "The liver." Maybe more; he can't be certain. "I hide my tracks."

And now he can see them: the neat little sutures. He thinks, for just a moment, of Hannibal's wrists.

The work is perfect. Confident. Not disordered in the slightest, but masterful, an artist displaying his craft. Will's mind thrills at how distinct the Ripper is from every other mind he's touched.

"She loses consciousness during the surgery; without ether, the strain is too much. I drain the blood from her once she is insensate. She never stirs. I don't need her to."

Her flesh becomes only a medium, clay and stone and paint, and he steps easily into the next phase; both the slaughter and the art are the point, and neither receives less than its due.

"As always, I display this kill for an audience, though I killed her only for myself. And as always, the arrangement of the body holds a myriad of meanings and references, all reflecting back on one another in aesthetic harmony. But this time, I have included something specific, meant to be deciphered. Each flower and placement has its meaning, and those meanings can be found in any of a hundred guidebooks." He blinks, frowns. "This is not a challenge. It's an invitation."

And in the sharp mix of longing and confusion that swells in him, Will finds himself back on the bank of the river, facing a corpse in the early stages of rot. The stench of the river and the flowers is overpowering. He staggers away.

Crawford is at his side immediately. "What is it?"

Will rubs at his Mark reflexively as he pants, "A message."

oOo

The flowers pouring from the woman's mouth are bittersweets; Price glosses them as *Truth* , the simpler of the two messages. A lying tongue replaced with an honest substitute. It may be an indication of why the Ripper chose this woman, or it may not.

The one behind the ear, white clover, causes more confusion. The placement indicates it is directed at the viewer, the recipient of the flower. *Think of me* , it demands.

As if Will could do otherwise. As if any of them could. But it can't be that simple.

They spend the rest of the day at the river bank and in the morgue. One of Crawford's runners discovers the identity of the victim: Emmeline Prichard, a nurse at a small convalescent home in another district. There are no hints as to the Ripper's identity, but Will feels so close he could taste it. More than once, he thinks he sees the shadow of antlers.

And it follows him home.

That night, he dreams of the Ripper. Dreams of chasing him through the streets, and into a great forest. He isn't afraid, or angry, but *exultant*. Bloodless arms sprout from the ground, hands grasping for his ankles, but they never catch him. He never catches the Ripper, either.

Will wakes up in the garden, fingers scraped raw from clawing at the walls.

He spends the next day retrieving and reviewing old Ripper files. None give him the same rush of recognition as the site, but he's seduced all the same, unable to pull himself away. The Ripper's kills feel pure, in a way no others ever have. They accept the totality of human suffering and then…move on.

It calls to something in him.

Alone in his townhouse, sometime after a lunch of fried oysters from a stand a few streets over, Will strips to the waist and stares at himself in a darkened mirror. Behind him, he conjures a shadow. Pictures antlers and a glowing Mark, *somewhere* on that inky body.

It remains resolutely in his own image and, more than that, inanimate. Nobody home. Will doesn't know enough. Or—or maybe that's not true, because he *does* know so much already. He knows the impersonal disdain the Ripper has for his victims. He knows the artistry that flows from the canvas of the body. He knows the skill and the eye and the hunger.

Wait. No.

Hunger?

There's no sign of hunger at any of these scenes, not that Will has ever noticed. He chalks it up to too much time in Hannibal's company.

Hannibal. Hannibal and the Ripper are both Marked. Will frowns into the glass, wondering if perhaps...

He tries to build a double based on Hannibal. That one, too, remains inanimate.

The Mark. Just as it allows him to oust Hannibal from his body during possession, and just like it allows Hannibal to dissolve Will's doubles, it stops Will from doubling another Marked person. He isn't pleased at the discovery, but he is...relieved. Relieved to know it likely isn't *his* failure.

But it doesn't help him understand the Ripper any better.

Two evenings after Will spent the night, Frederick Chilton arrives at Hannibal's doorstep for dinner. Late.

"Apologies, Dr. Lecter," he says , simpering and self-important as always— *highly unattractive*— as Hannibal takes his coat and leads him through to the dining room. "Troubles at the asylum. Some days I think I ought to have given that charlatan with his traveling lobotomy show a chance. Would've certainly saved me some headaches."

"By displacing them onto others," Hannibal says, seating him and pouring him a generous glass of wine. "Perhaps reasonable in certain circumstances."

Throughout the appetizer course of delicate pâté toasts, he listens politely to drabble about the asylum: the newest transferred patients, Chilton's research, the thorough dressing down he had decided to give that traveling lobotomist. Only when the main course is served does Chilton seem keen to move on to more interesting topics.

"I don't think I've ever had tongue," he says when Hannibal sets the plate in front of him.

Hannibal smiles. "She was a particularly chatty lamb."

The meat separates cleanly under Chilton's fork and Hannibal watches as the doctor digs in, savoring his first bite. And clearly enjoying it— *though it's hardly as satisfying and enjoyable as watching Will work his way through a meal.*

"Abel Gideon continues to be not particularly *chatty* ," Chilton sighs.

Hannibal tilts his head at the name. "Your patient who believes he's the Ripper?"

At previous dinners, Chilton has talked at some length about Abel Gideon, though Alana Bloom always seemed to find those conversations deeply distasteful, shutting them down wherever possible. Especially after Gideon murdered one of his nurses.

"Abel Gideon *is* the Ripper," Chilton chides with a wave of his fork. Hannibal privately wonders how long it will take news of the newest Ripper murder to reach him; still, he doubts Chilton will change his tune even given ample evidence. "The irony is, before he killed that poor nurse, all he wanted to do was talk. *Now* , well, now this may as well be his tongue we're enjoying."

"Don't give me ideas. Your tongue is particularly spirited." Hannibal says with a slender smile. "Which may be to your detriment. In your quest to keep a golden goose among the bumbling, flightless fowl, Frederick, your treatment may have reduced him to one of the flock. He may never fly again."

He drinks in the bewildered look that passes over Chilton's face, momentarily startled as if he's seen a ghost. Hannibal merely lifts his brows, waiting for an answer *—and inside, delighted; like him, Frederick must have remembered the dream that Will visited.*

"A golden goose doesn't have to fly; it just has to lay golden eggs," Chilton replies tersely , trying to shake it off but it looks like the comment itches at him. "He's a prized patient. Or should be. And now I feel like I'm fumbling with his head."

Hannibal takes a bite of his meal, considers. "Has Will Graham talked with Dr. Gideon?"

A conspiratorial smile creeps over Chilton's mouth.

"You're familiar with Mr. Graham? Now there's a mind I'd love to get my hands on. You know, he's quite the topic of conversation among my colleagues. That thing he does...we're woefully short of material on it." He takes a long drink of his wine and laments, "Alas, Jack Crawford is reluctant to part with him. Mr. Graham himself looks like he'll bite me every time I ask."

Privately, Hannibal smiles into his wine glass —*he thoroughly enjoys the mental image of Will taking a rather large chunk out of Frederick's cheek.*

"Yes," he says, putting aside the urge to rip Will's name out of Chilton's mouth along with his tongue. "That sounds like Will."

Chilton tongues his cheek, clearly noting Hannibal's easy use of Will's first name, and goes on, "I asked after him when Gideon went after the nurse—mind, this was after I consulted for Inspector Crawford. He agreed to speak with him, then came away unconvinced and claiming that, and I quote, *Abel Gideon has no sense of artistry*."

So Will does see the craftsmanship behind his designs. The thought simmers inside Hannibal even as he says, "Will is perceptive. I trust his judgement."

Chilton, finished with his meal, sets his utensils down on the edge of his plate. He runs a look over Hannibal once —*searching, digging with grubby fingers; it's Frederick's way and it never reveals much, only leaves sticky prints all over everything*— and drums his fingers lightly on the table beside his wine glass.

"This city can be so dreadfully small sometimes. Now, you and I, running in the same circles, that is understandable. And Alana Bloom, of course. And though she has a policy to never mention him, I know how she knows Will Graham," he says carefully. His eyes narrow slightly when he asks, "But why do you?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that, Frederick. Not without violating his privacy." Hannibal blots his mouth with his napkin and then gives him a polite smile. "Would you care for dessert?"

That night, as Will prepares dinner (far simpler than anything Hannibal would serve him), Crawford comes to Will's door again. Will must make a better portrait of bedrest this time, wrapped in a housecoat and worn down after the day's experimentations and dead ends, because Crawford actually looks sheepish.

"We never talked about the killer from the lodging house," he says, on the doorstep where Will doesn't let him pass.

"Ripper's a bit more pressing," Will says.

"I need you to tell me what you know. We can't get her to talk."

"Do you need her to?" He squints in the evening gloom; there aren't many street lamps near his townhouse. "You have her in custody. You have a dead body. She was hiding at the site. That would be enough for the constables."

Crawford glowers.

Will sighs. "Fine. I have—theories. But I can't see her again, so tell me what you found out. "

"Her name is Georgia Madchen. Her mother claimed her. Says she's been acting erratically for months, claiming she was already dead."

"Let me guess," Will says. "Relieved that somebody else is now responsible for her daughter."

"Something like that."

Will scrubs at his face with one hand. Realizes, belatedly, that his collar is unbuttoned, and hopes that in the dim light, Crawford won't see the suck marks dotting his throat. He flips the robe's collar, such as it is, up as if against the chill. "Then the mother knows almost as much as I do. Georgia Madchen is convinced she's dead, and she's terrified. And something is wrong with how she sees faces. Didn't H—Dr. Lecter convey all this to you?"

"He did. But it doesn't explain the murder. Mrs. Madchen confirms Georgia knew her victim. They grew up together. Were thick as thieves until a few years ago, when her daughter started having trouble. No bad blood between them, just—distance."

"I don't *know* , Jack," Will says, suddenly frustrated.

"Then figure it out," Crawford says.

He doesn't stay long after that.

Will retreats back inside and paces. He doesn't have room in his head for Georgia Madchen now, not with the Ripper crowding every corner of his mind. And it is easy to turn away from the woman, away from that empty, bleak place that Hannibal had rescued him from. His hand goes to the marks on his belly, still painful and bruised. He pushes in, gently.

Alive. He's alive.

And so is she. She deserves to be understood. He thinks nobody else has really tried. She's bound, no doubt, for Chilton's asylum, and nobody there will see her, either.

Will reaches a decision. He mounts the stairs toward bed, and thinks of a living dead girl.

oOo

Georgia Madchen dreams of greyness.

She is the only thing of any substance, and she floats face up in a lake of grey the exact color as the air; only the way it hides parts of her from view and reveals others gives any sense of the surface. Her eyes are open and unseeing. Maggots writhe in her flesh.

Will wades into the muck. It is bottomless. He is forced to swim, and as he does, he feels fish nibble at him, then strip flesh away in great chunks. This place rots and destroys; he won't have much time.

"Georgia?" he calls, when he swims up alongside her. His motions cause no ripples.

Her rotted brow contorts, as if in pain.

"I see you, Georgia. Think of who you are," he says. He doesn't so much remember Hannibal's voice from the other day as let it flow through him; he takes Hannibal's certainty, his patience. "Your name is Georgia Madchen. You are not alone. We're here together."

She makes a sound then, much like a cry, and begins to sink.

Will lunges forward in the muck, kicking hard, and catches her. He forces her back up above the surface, because she needs to breathe. She needs to function as if she's alive.

She stares up at him, wide-eyed, in something between awe and horror. "You," she says, and her voice scrapes in Will's ears. "I know you. But I don't recognize you."

"I found you," he says. "Below the bed. In the blood."

She frowns more fiercely. "I couldn't see your face. I can see your face now."

"Good. That's good, Georgia." He smiles.

"Why is it different?"

He shrugs; it is difficult in the muck. "This is a dream. Dream logic is simple logic. I can see you. You can see me." He pauses. "I *want* to see you. And I think you want to see me. Or just see anybody at all."

Georgia begins to kick her legs at last. They disentangle, but she doesn't go far. Her hair has regained some of its color. Her chest moves as she breathes. "Why? Why would you want to see me?"

"Because I was dead, too. And then somebody reminded me how to be alive."

Georgia shakes her head, thrashing in the muck. The horror becomes ascendant. She fears remaining dead, but being alive possesses just as much terror. "I might remember what I did," she protests. "I don't want to remember."

"You know what you did, Georgia," he says, gently.

"But I don't remember it. I don't remember it like I did it. It feels more like some horrible dream where I killed my friend."

"In that dream, why did you do it?"

"Because—it wasn't her. I'd come to her, hoping she'd help me feel like myself again, or at least that she would recognize me and *know* I was dead, but then I got there and it wasn't her. I couldn't see her face. It was like she'd been replaced, and she was frightened of me, and I..."

"Panicked," Will supplies.

"Something like that," she agrees. "And if it was really her, I don't—I can't—"

And she sinks again. Will dives in after her, but there is only grey, grey, grey, and the unseen things eating him, bit by bit, squirming under his skin, burrowing into his veins. He thrashes when hands seize him, when they drag him back out into the translucent grey above the water and haul him to an invisible shore. Practiced hands shove the water from his lungs, drag him back to screaming life. They pluck each worm from his flesh. They put him back together again, even as he fights to follow Georgia Madchen.

"Not yet," his own voice says in somebody else's timbre. "You owe me my answer first. *Who am I* ?"

Will opens his mouth to say *Me* , but finds he isn't as sure. Not anymore.

He wakes up without an answer.

The day of Will's next appointment, Hannibal finishes his rounds early.

He typically finds himself waylaid by Jack during or after his visits with Phyllis, but today, the investigator is nowhere to be seen —*not with something else to look at, another small crumb in the trail of the Ripper that always seems to dead-end.* After leaving Phyllis to the morphine-sleep of her afternoon nap, he contemplates dropping in on Will, though he won't be expected for another few hours. He finds coming by without warning to be terribly rude — *in this case, however, it's a situation he's more than willing to go to his knees to beg forgiveness for.*

Given Jack's absence, he's prepared to find nothing but an empty house. He hails a cab all the same.

But when Hannibal knocks, Will does answer. He comes to the door looking haggard. The skin under his eyes, scrunched against the afternoon sun, is purple-black and sleepless. There's a sheen to his gaze, distraction or the soft unfocus of a looming headache.

After a moment's silence, Will says, "You're early."

Hannibal ignores that statement of the obvious and steps closer. With the lingering smell of the docks and without taking in a noticeable breath, he only catches the edge of that saccharine smell on Will he'd noticed when he'd taken him to bed —*strangely warm, heat lingering somewhere in it.* Despite the cover of his bedrest —*which Jack seems intent on breaking*— it seems that in his stress, Will may have actually picked up a mild illness.

He asks, "Are you feeling alright, Will?"

Will huffs a laugh.

"No. Not really." He steps back and gestures Hannibal inside with a tilt of his head, then winces. "Headache's back. And worse, this time. But Crawford has his answers about the girl at the boarding house, at least. Just got back from dropping off my report."

Hannibal follows him, watching with mild interest as Will loosens his collar and undoes his waistcoat. “I’m glad. I’ve heard Dr. Sutcliffe is no closer to discovering the source of her illness but is managing to keep any more of her skin from peeling away. His work with leprosy patients reaping its rewards.”

"Why are you early?" Will asks, stopping just into the hall and turning back to look at him. “Did something happen?”

“Not that I’m aware of. No Jack Crawford to hold me up at the end of my rounds today meant I could finish early. And I wanted to see you.” Hannibal crowds close to Will once more now that he’s stopped and shuffles the curls off his forehead, palm meeting slightly-damp skin. “You’re feeling a bit warm.”

"A fever?" Will relaxes slightly into his touch. "Not surprising, I guess. Crawford waylaid me on my way home from your house the other day. There was another Ripper killing. And then the boarding house report. I've been...busy."

“Not surprising at all, then. Jack Crawford has always been relentless and with the Ripper striking again, all the more so,” Hannibal says and slips his hand down along Will’s jaw. “Stress has been known to raise body temperature. Forgive me for trying to officially be your physician, but I think you should rest.”

Will snorts. "You'll understand I'm loath to waste any of our time together resting."

His gaze drifts over Hannibal's face and he nuzzles into Hannibal’s palm, eyes falling half-lidded. The look sends a spark of lazy heat through Hannibal. He bends just enough to set his bag down by the door before leaning in to press a slow, soft kiss to Will’s mouth —*no teeth, no frantic exploration; a kiss like a lullaby or laudanaum.*

“As am I,” he says when he pulls away. “I am open to compromise. After all, I should likely repay you for turning up at your door unannounced.”

Will's tongue darts out, clearly chasing the taste of him on his lower lip.

"Repay me?" he asks, tone lightly teasing as his hand finds its way to Hannibal’s waist.

“Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me.” Hannibal presses a kiss to the angle of Will’s jaw just below his ear. He covers Will’s hand with his own and encourages the fingers to tighten. “And I’m afraid I’ve been terribly rude. Allow me to clear your mind so you can rest. Of course, there is always laudanum, if you’d prefer that.”

Will shivers against him. His hand tightens. His head tips back, breath hitching.

“No laudanum,” is all he says, and then he’s pulling Hannibal toward the stairs.

oOo

Hannibal abides by Will’s request.

Will dozes gently on the bed, mussed and rumpled, clothes mostly returned to their original state. Hannibal is still thinking about the weight of his cock and the lingering taste of him —*he already laments the slow dispersal of it every time he swallows*— when he gets up to look around. Will's bedroom is as unusual as his not-dining room, mostly empty, his bed only covered with a plain sheet and a lone blanket draped over the end. He takes the opportunity to quietly peer through Will's dresser —*everything neatly and tightly folded, ducks all in a row* — and the rather simple, modest closet that matches the rest of the bedroom.

After, he slips quietly back down the stairs and carries his bag into the unused but tidy room at the front of the house to finish his patient notes for the day. He makes a special trip into the not-dining room to continue poking around from where he left off the first time. He comes across several files, neat and typewritten, spread out on the desk. Each brown-paper folder is stamped with a name and he traces them with curious fingers: *G. Madchen* , *A. Gideon* , *G.J. Hobbs* - " *Shrike* ", *Unknown* - " *the Ripper* ". He picks up a sheaf of thick, artists' paper resting atop Will's scattered notes: a watercolor of a woman kneeling on tiny, smooth river stones, abdominal skin reflected and purple flowers blooming from her mouth.

Hannibal smiles and tucks the rendering back into the file.

By the time he's taken the liberty of reading and carefully replacing all of Will's files, it's time to prepare supper. Hannibal methodically searches every one of Will Graham's cupboards. He can appreciate modesty —*he simply rarely indulges in it*— which Will has in spades, and cobbles together enough ingredients to make pasta. A simple yet flavorful recipe, with olive oil, garlic, and the last hunk of cured, salted pork in Will's larder.

Water bubbles merrily on the stove when Hannibal hears the stairs groan.

The footsteps grow louder in the hall and stop right at the entrance to the kitchen. Hannibal says, "I seem to have been proven correct. You hardly needed the laudanum after."

He looks over to see Will standing in the doorway. Will doesn't look around. Or blink. His eyes are full black, sclera and iris blotted out entirely.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter," says the Unnamed.

It's Will Graham's voice, but isn't. It's underlaid with an echo, a sepulchral hiss. The wounds on Hannibal's wrists, swollen but healing with little pain, flare with sudden agony. He sucks in a breath to brace against it.

"Forgive me if I don't greet you the same. Calling you by the moniker given by those who set themselves against you seems disrespectful," Hannibal says, refusing to break stride. "I've never given it much thought, but now our conversations seem to be much more frequent."

Will, no —*this is not Will; this is chaos in his skin*— the Unnamed draws closer, not with the smooth movements of a sleepwalker but slow, too slow. Will's fingers jump and jerk where they hang limp at his sides. "I would not call this a conversation."

"Another nudge, then?" He looks away from the Unnamed long enough to tip the pasta into the pot —*and hopes this time won't be disastrous, as Will had called it*. "You have eight and a

half minutes and then I'm afraid I must attend to the food. I take it you've been the reason Will finds himself waking in strange places?"

The Unnamed pushes itself onto the counter beside him. Hannibal tries not to watch the flex of corded muscles in Will's forearms. It catches Hannibal's look all the same and grins in a way Will's face were never meant to accommodate, mad and straining.

"Not all of them," it says with a low chuckle. It rasps in Will's chest, more of a caged scream. "His unpredictability is...tasty. You think so, too. In your way."

Its fingers twitch over Will's stomach. Over the bites.

Hannibal doesn't react to that. Nor does he deny it. "You're more fascinated with the madness than the man."

It shakes its head. "This man is hardly mad."

"No, but the lucidity that vivid imagination and pure empathy give him makes him feel as if he is. Or could be." Hannibal pulls the block of salted meat towards him and begins slicing it into paper-thin shavings. "I think he would kill you, if he could."

"You cannot kill the tide, the wind, the march of time, because there is nothing in them to kill," the Unnamed says, thoroughly unperturbed. It reaches out and palms at Hannibal's upper thigh *—he braces for its eventual destination but in the end it stops short—* and hooks fingernails through his trousers and into his burn scar. "But he may try. You wouldn't. Perhaps that makes you mad."

In those digging nails, Hannibal's flesh erupts with sensation *—he feels each drag of the knife into the muscle, numb from the cold, every swirl and swipe of the Mark that he rendered from memory until it stood out vivid red against his thigh.*

"I defy categorization," he grunts against the sensation. "You have six minutes."

The Unnamed releases him and settles back against the cabinets, watching Hannibal recollect himself *—it takes a moment, his practice imperfect*. When Hannibal eventually returns to slicing, it runs its pointer finger up and down the knife as it rocks through the meat.

"You've possessed him. Or tried to. His powers protect him. He's learning them quickly and…looking for you. And doesn't yet understand why he can't see the killer he's looking for." Its eyelids slip shut before it makes a small, broken sigh. It's the closest it's come to Will's actual voice and makes Hannibal stiffen. "Yes, you've been inside him but not in every way you want to be. He would let you, you know."

With Hannibal's sudden rush of desire comes a thin needle of cold doubt. This creature likes to whisper, same as him; there is no way to know how Will Graham hears the thoughts inside his skull, whose tone, timbre and accent they are. No way to know if this incandescent thing between them is all its game *—a lit match burning itself to the quick in a flash and both of them along with it.*

Hannibal simply gives the Unnamed a reproving look. “I am not that easily provoked.”

The Unnamed does not reply. It slides off the counter, sinuous and silent, and wraps its arms around Hannibal, pressing Will’s chest to his back. “Have you ever wanted to get caught?” it asks. “To see what would happen?”

“You have wanted to see me caught,” he replies.

“I do not want anything at all,” it whispers back. Quick as a snake, it snaps Hannibal’s earlobe in its teeth and bites savagely. He feels an eyetooth burst the skin open and blood start to slide down his neck. The Unnamed catches the bead before it hits his collar, and licks the length of skin back to his ear clean. “Him falling into your path to catch you? That is luck. Chance. And I’m very much looking forward to when he figures it out.”

And with that, Will’s arms go limp.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

At first, Will doesn't respond. His focus has turned inwards, and Hannibal is treated to the mesmerizing display of Will Graham's mind at work. His brow furrows, his head inclines gently to one side, and he looks down at his plate, lips parted as if in anticipation. His expression flickers once, twice, as if he is on the verge of speaking, until, at last, realization transforms it entirely.

"He's eating them," Will says, quietly. There is wonder in his voice.

In a second that feels like forever, Hannibal loses himself in that note of awe.

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Will starts putting the pieces together. Hannibal takes him apart. Jack brings bad news at the worst time.

Consciousness is a gradual process. Will is first aware of the sounds and smells of cooking. Then he registers, with pleasure, the warmth against his chest and Hannibal's familiar scent. For a moment, he thinks he's still in bed, twined around Hannibal. That there's dinner waiting for him, maybe.

But no. No, he's not lying down. His brow furrows as his eyes flutter open. He stares at the back of Hannibal's head. Everything comes together—standing, kitchen, a bright, sharp taste on his tongue—and Will staggers back with a startled, half-bitten-off curse.

Hannibal turns, catching hold of his arms, tight enough to ground him in his body despite the rabbiting of his heart.

"Will," he says, quiet and steady. "You were sleepwalking."

"I taste blood," Will whispers.

His eyes dart around the room. He doesn't want to look at Hannibal again. Doesn't want to see the sluggishly bleeding cut on his ear. That's all there is, but there shouldn't be *anything*.

"Why didn't you lock me in?" He can't stop the pleading note in his voice. "Why didn't you *stop* me? What did I do?"

Hannibal steers Will to the kitchen table and guides him into a chair. He drags the other chair close and takes a seat.

“I don’t have the key to your room,” Hannibal answers, all logic and calm. He rubs soothing circles into Will’s wrists through the thin fabric of his shirt, over and over. “You don’t stop a sleepwalker, only guide them out of danger. You bit me, but that’s of no consequence. I want you to look at me, Will. Look at me.”

“I *bit* you,” Will repeats, and he knew that, but to hear Hannibal say it so plainly—

(*Well* , a part of him responds, *he bit* ***you*** *, and you liked it. Remember?*)

He’s breathing fast and shallow, and he knows he needs to get ahold of it, but he can’t. He feels so entirely out of control. Half-mad. He does, with great difficulty, manage to look at Hannibal.

As soon as their eyes meet, Hannibal lifts a hand to cradle his jaw and brushes a finger against his bottom lip. He turns the finger toward Will, streaked pinkish with blood and spittle.

“You bit me.” Hannibal wipes the fluid away. “Do you remember who and where you are?”

That provokes a flash of anger. “Yes, I’m not—it’s not—” Will groans and buries his face in his hands. “My name is Will Graham and I’m in my kitchen, which I sleepwalked into so I could bite you. While—” he peeks up, “—you made me dinner.”

“I don’t imagine you came down just to bite me,” Hannibal says, humor in his voice. Will feels a tug at his fingers and lets Hannibal pull them away entirely. “More accurately, I’m *making* dinner. If I don’t take the pasta off in the next minute or so, I’m afraid it will overcook.”

But he doesn’t move. He stays and searches Will’s face.

“Go. Take care of your pasta,” Will says.

It’ll give him a moment to regroup, to—to adjust. To feel less like an unpredictable animal.

“You’d think I would eventually run out of ways to be unstable,” he adds, mostly to himself.

Hannibal does him the favor of not responding to that, instead getting up to test the pasta. It must be acceptable, because Hannibal drains it, then adds it all to a dish and mixes in—something. Will’s sure it will taste good. It always tastes good.

The panicked tension slowly leaves his shoulders as he watches the flex of Hannibal’s back, the confident movements of his hands.

Another few brisk motions, and Hannibal glances over at Will. “Tell me the last thing you remember.”

“Being in bed,” Will says, and for a moment he can still feel Hannibal’s mouth on him, and the lazy softness after, sinking down beside him like it’s the easiest thing in the world. “With you. Falling asleep. I didn’t have any dreams, no tossing and turning. I was in bed with you, and then I was in the kitchen with you.” A cruel joke, those bookends. “Why does it matter?”

“A sleepwalker’s actions can correlate to their dreams,” Hannibal explains. “Would you like something to drink?”

He props an elbow on the table and leans heavily on it. “Yes, but is wine going to help or hurt?”

“Tea, then,” Hannibal says, filling and setting the kettle.

The mundane comfort of it all gradually loosens the tension in Will’s chest. “This feels worse than the other episodes,” he confesses. “It’s a special kind of horror, knowing that not only do I move around in my sleep, but that I have the coordination to act on others. Like there’s a black web around my soul, tugging it to action when my guard’s down.”

He steals another look at the red scab on Hannibal’s ear. It’s a dark blot against his skin and the ashen fall of his hair. But not out of place, not really.

“Would it comfort you to know that even in cases of non-preternatural sleepwalking, people sew, cook breakfast, or put on clothes as if going about their daily lives? Some can be violent. Others even have sex.”

Will digests that. He can’t say if he’s comforted or disturbed, and he almost asks if Hannibal knows of any cases of full blown sleep-murder.

“Did you know I was asleep?” he asks instead. “Could you tell? Did I—did I frighten you?”

“You weren’t trying to hurt me. The bite was…affectionate.” Will catches Hannibal’s little smile before he turns away to add another ingredient to their meal. After a thoughtful pause, Hannibal goes on, “You’re hardly the first sleepwalker I’ve encountered. I used to find my sister wandering the halls of our home in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I would walk with her, clear paths for her. Keep her safe.”

“Your sister?” Will asks, surprised; Hannibal has never mentioned family before. “Did she grow out of it?”

“She never got the chance. She died very young.”

His voice is steady, as if unaffected, but he still doesn’t look at Will. Instead, he takes cups and plates down from the cupboard and then checks a few drawers—looking for silverware, Will realizes.

Not unaffected. Keeping himself busy.

Will gets up without a word and opens the correct drawer. He gazes at Hannibal for a long moment before looking out at the darkening garden instead.

“I’m sorry,” he says, softly. Softly enough that they can both ignore it, if that’s easier.

Somehow, after his surprise that first night at Hannibal’s home being empty, he’d never again considered Hannibal with a family. Let alone one visited by grief. He wonders if that says more about Hannibal or himself.

Over the open drawer between them, Hannibal reaches over and closes his hand around Will's, thumb passing gently over his mostly-healed knuckles. Will looks back at him, heart too full of too many things.

Hannibal leans over and kisses him. Soft, barely a brush of lips. It feels like more.

Will returns the kiss, eyes sliding closed. He pulls away only to rest their foreheads together, a slight strain with the drawer between them, but worth it. He sees, for just a moment, Hannibal as a boy, clearing a safe path for his sister. He sees Hannibal now, as a man, doing the same for him.

"And thank you." He laces their fingers together. "For telling me. And for being here."

Hannibal shuts his eyes and his throat bobs. "Thank you for allowing me to stay."

Will's forehead against his is still clammy *—and this close the fevered sweetness is almost overwhelming; Will may be in for some genuine medical care before the night is out.* He leans back and presses a kiss to Will's knuckles before letting him go.

"I think you have a proper fever, Will."

"Very romantic, doctor," Will says with a laugh, gathering up the silverware they'll need. His eyes drop to Hannibal's wrists. "Are you healing alright? No more slipped stitches, I hope."

The look he fixes Hannibal with just walks the line of accusatory. At the reminder of their existence *—and with the memory of re-suturing four stitches after his nighttime kill flashing by—* Hannibal's wrists prickle with pain. Nothing like the agony in the Unnamed's mere presence, but more than he expected.

Hannibal fixes him with a look of his own, amused but soft. "I'm afraid I've had to do some unavoidable heavy lifting but I'm healing as well as can be expected."

Satisfied with that answer, Will sets their places and sits down while Hannibal returns to the stove and plates dinner.

"Crawford is going to expect me back in a day or two, I think," Will says. "I'm not sure I can put him off again after giving in the last few days."

"I suspect Jack will continue to disregard your physical and mental health in the name of saving lives, which puts me in the position of having to preserve both." Hannibal sets down the plates at his place and in front of Will. "I don't care about the lives you save, Will. I care about your life."

He's perfectly prepared to defend this line of reasoning but no argument comes. Instead, Will stares at him, expression caught somewhere between stunned and flattered.

Hannibal nods down at his plate and adds, "Try to eat. I'll be back in a moment."

He returns to the front room for his medical bag. After digging around in its depths, he retrieves a drawstring pouch full of fragrant, herbal tea bags. Hannibal returns to the kitchen just as the kettle begins to screech and he makes Will a cup with one of them. Will is picking at his dinner, but is eating, slowly but surely.

“I want you to try this for the fever,” Hannibal says, handing it over and then taking his own seat.

“What’s in it?” Will asks, lifting the cup to inhale the steam.

“Willow bark. More of a pastoral remedy that some might call unorthodox, but I find it safely reduces most cases of mild febrility.” Hannibal begins to eat and Will sips his tea, managing the intermittent bite under his watchful eye. “I’d like to see anything you’re already taking as well. Tinctures, suspensions, powders. For any reason.”

“Generally just this one headache treatment,” Will says, with a shrug.

He finishes the cup with only a slight nose-scrunch of distaste then gets up and disappears into the not-dining room. He returns and hands Hannibal a box emblazoned with the curling words *Pimms’ Headache Powders* and illustrations of industrious bees.

He retakes his seat and adds, “I keep away from laudanum and anything that includes morphine, except at your insistence.”

“And I recommend you continue to. This, however — ” Hannibal turns the box around and barely manages to hide his distaste. “ — contains cocaine, not to mention a host of useless ingredients that will impact digestion. I will leave all the tea I have with you.”

"Cocaine, huh? Might explain a few things." Will frowns as Hannibal sets the box at the edge of the table. "The tea is a lot less portable.”

“It is. If you can’t go without the powder entirely, try to use it only when you need something to take along.” Hannibal searches his face. The fever smell is a recent development, though one could hardly blame him if he didn’t catch it under the aftershave —*a stress reaction, perhaps, exacerbated by forcible possession, or even simply the overwhelming force that is Jack Crawford.* “You told me when you met that you’re prone to headaches.”

"They've been happening a lot more often recently,” Will says. “Worse and more persistent. I'm more or less used to them, though. Or used to dealing with them, I guess."

“That means you can be aware if anything changes,” Hannibal says. “If you start to find yourself in strange places while awake and don’t remember how you got there, I want you to tell me.”

Will pales at that, but says nothing. Hannibal continues with his meal, thoughtful, and lets him pick at his dinner. Now that he knows the Unnamed has possessed Will before, he needs to keep a closer watch to determine how and when it does —*why is less important, because there likely isn’t a why*.

After a long stretch of silence he asks, “This new Ripper killing, did Jack bring you to see it in person?”

“Yes,” Will answers, sounding grateful to get to put his fork down, and sits back in his seat. “Actually, I’d been meaning to tell you—I’m now *certain* the Ripper also possesses a Mark. I attempted to pattern a double off of him. It didn’t work. Just like it didn’t work when I tried to pattern one off of you.”

At first, all Hannibal can do is blink and repeat, “Off of me?”

Will nods and crosses his arms over his chest. It’s good, this very clear indication of control over the doubling, or at least the makings of it *—and the ripple of satisfaction under his skin, satisfaction that Will tried to double him, feels like antlers and darkness.*

“How didn’t it work? As in you couldn’t do it at all?” he asks, allowing his curiosity to leak into his voice. “Or as in there was something different about those two doubles?”

"Something different. Each time it was...blank. Inanimate. But I must know as much about you as I do about Abel Gideon, and I can pattern a double on him without any issue. The difference must be the presence of a Mark." Will chews at his bottom lip a moment before continuing. "Not helpful for Crawford, though. Or even really for me. Just confirmation of something I already suspected."

Hannibal quietly hopes that Will knows him in a great many more ways than a man who he visited in a room in Chilton’s prized asylum *—only the controlled ways that he has allowed, of course*. Curious, however, that his double and the Ripper’s seem distinct to Will.

He doesn’t yet understand why he can’t see the killer he’s looking for , the Unnamed had said.

Hannibal wonders how long that will last.

“Confirmation of suspicion is its own kind of progress,” he says. “Jack will likely have to make his own connection to that aspect of the Ripper. Was there anything about the body itself that could give away the fact that the Ripper is Marked?”

"I don't think so. Just the usual surgical skill and confidence." Will’s eyes unfocus a little, but he continues, "He's trying to communicate this time, though. More than just as an artist displaying his work to an audience. One of the flowers left at the scene, Crawford's team translated it as a request to *Think of me*. As if he needed to ask."

As if he needed to ask.

It was a plea, a taunt, a whisper in Will’s ear: *think of all of me*. Hannibal can’t be sure how the pieces will come together, if they will fit seamlessly together or scrape themselves raw or break on impact. All he can do is set them up, one hand on Will’s shoulder, and hope.

But then Will blinks, gaze snapping back sharp and present. "I saw—something. An echo of him, or just an outgrowth of my imagination."

“Hallucinations can feel very real, though I won’t be so quick to discount the Mark as an explanation. A newfound power?” Hannibal takes a bite of his dinner, considers it. He leans forward. “What did you see?”

Will huffs a quiet laugh and pushes at the food still left on his plate. "What else? A tar-black figure crowned in antlers."

“What else indeed?” Hannibal says, brows lifting.

"And I felt...hunger. Deep, abiding hunger. But I don't know if that's *him* , or bleedover from you." Will’s hand falls to his belly. "Or me."

Think of me , had been Hannibal’s whispered invitation.

And Will had.

—but thinking is hardly implicit acceptance, especially when it seems Will still struggles to accept himself—

“I can’t say I have the same understanding of the mind as my colleagues in the psychological fields, nor am I an alienist. But I’m aware that the mind has its own hunger, distinct from that which we feel in our stomachs, yet no less real. Perhaps going deep beneath the skin will help you understand the true nature of his desire.” Hannibal settles back in his chair and says, “We all hunger, Will.”

At first, Will doesn’t respond. His focus has turned inwards, and Hannibal is treated to the mesmerizing display of Will Graham’s mind at work. His brow furrows, his head inclines gently to one side, and he looks down at his plate, lips parted as if in anticipation. His expression flickers once, twice, as if he is on the verge of speaking, until, at last, realization transforms it entirely.

“He’s eating them,” Will says, quietly. There is wonder in his voice.

In a second that feels like forever, Hannibal loses himself in that note of awe.

He had been more than prepared for the normal reaction to the barest implication, let alone outright certainty, of eating one’s fellow man: a combination of pity and vehement disgust and the kind of bone-deep horror that had been irrevocably driven out of him long ago *—but not this, never—*

It’s beyond what he could’ve hoped. The kind of thing he hadn't let himself imagine for the sake of practicality and his own self-control.

And then Will finally looks at him, stunned, and Hannibal’s heart constricts. “The trophies he takes. Tell me, what would you do with a liver?”

He makes himself wait, consider the question for an appropriate amount of time *—do not seem too eager; even if Will might not notice.*

“Liver is extremely versatile.It can be cooked simply, soaked in milk and fried with onions, but I would make it the star of a lavish spread, marinated in sweet ice wine, seared crisp and drizzled with pomegranate molasses, served with warm dates. Taste is subjective.”

“But with the attention to detail—and to *taste* —in the displays of the bodies, I can’t imagine the Ripper would—just fry it black in a pan. Unless, of course, it’s a dichotomy—the artistic killing, the animalistic consumption, but I don’t think…” Will trails off, fingers tapping on the table. His gaze returns to Hannibal, excited and intrigued. “Public or private consumption, do you think? The displays are meant to be viewed. Is his cooking meant to be tasted?”

Hannibal luxuriates in the attention, in the fevered ardor of those shining blue eyes, the clever cut of Will’s mouth as he talks. As he holds the pieces of Hannibal’s mind, moves them around to test their fit in the determined, thorough way he cleans blood and sucks cock and renders crime scenes down to their component parts.

—Will is close, so close, and he wonders, a bloody blissful thing, if this is what if feels like to be eaten alive—

“Cooking itself is an art. There is satisfaction in creating only for oneself, the same way a painter might appreciate their own landscape, but food gains meaning and connection when shared. When *experienced* ,” Hannibal answers. He cants himself forward, a minute thing — *it’s almost instinctual, the bend of a flower towards the sun.* “Does he do it for adoration, another display of skill, or for his own private amusement?”

“I doubt he tells his dinner guests what they’re eating—he’s very good at keeping himself safe. So adoration for the quality of the meal, the presentation, but the satisfaction comes from what he knows and his guests don’t. Extremely unlike the last cannibal I met; the Shrike did it as a huntsman. He used everything. Functionality first, aesthetics and taste second. But the Ripper? Taste first, always.” Will grins, rubs at his chin, genuine *delight* flashing in his gaze.

At Will’s disarming grin everything inside Hannibal turns dark and liquid. Will’s mind is captivating, beautiful and terrifying in equal measure, and he has always wanted to be the singular object flayed open under its focus.

“I wonder how far in advance he plans,” Will goes on, focus once more turning inward, sparing Hannibal his too-sharp attention for the moment. “If he chooses his trophies before he even begins the hunt, or if the hunt inspires his menu. The nurse—he took her tongue. I thought it was to keep her quiet while he worked, but you don’t need a tongue to scream. No, he took it to put it to better use. I wonder if a liar’s tongue is tastier for all that wagging.”

And then the spell breaks. Will’s luminous expression dims as if his decency has suddenly reared its head, shocked at his associations. “Sorry. This isn’t exactly good dinner conversation, is it?”

Hannibal barely hears Will’s apology before he’s on his feet and moving. He gets his hands in the fabric of Will’s collar and drags him to his feet, before crowding him against the table and crashing their mouths together.

It's senseless, all heat and need, a spark catching against tinder. It burns up his shame in an instant. Will feels more alive than he has in days, even moreso than when Hannibal had dragged him upstairs that afternoon, and he moans audibly as the edge of the table pushes hard into his thighs. One of his legs hooks over Hannibal's hips, and he is breathless and lost, so lost.

Hannibal pulls back long enough to murmur, "I'm sorry, Will. Seeing you work...it's nothing short of remarkable."

The praise goes straight through him like a lightning bolt.

"So you're not disgusted?" he murmurs, and doesn't wait for a response.

He doesn't need one. He arches up against Hannibal and nips at his lower lip, hands sliding beneath his suit jacket. As Will drags it off his shoulders, drops it to the floor, Hannibal's hand slides down to Will's stomach, pulling the shirt from his trousers in efficient handfuls, and then his palm is flat and broad and warm over the bandaged bites.

It's intoxicating: the grasping hands, the unmistakable jut of Hannibal's erection against his, the knowledge that this is all because of what Will can't help being. He feels like he's drunk, like he's drowning, and he never wants it to stop.

Hannibal's teeth rasp against his throat, against the fresh bruises and faint memories of contusions dotting his skin, and Will pants out short, gasping moans in answer. He couldn't be quiet if he tried, and he's not trying, head back and limbs tangled around Hannibal, one hand in his hair, the other untangling his cravat, baring his throat, stroking at the Mark there.

In answer, Hannibal urges the leg hooked around him tighter, closer.

Will leans back to wrestle with his own buttons. Hannibal takes the opportunity to reach past him and push Will's plate away from them, porcelain ringing against porcelain as the dishes collide. Will tosses his shirt aside and reaches for Hannibal again. There's too much space between them.

Hannibal fixes that, hauling Will's other leg up around his waist and hefting him up onto the table. He presses Will back against the pitted wood, one hand in his curls to hold him down, hungry mouth burning over the Mark. Will's hips roll in small unconscious twitches as Hannibal grinds the heel of his hand against Will's cock through his trousers. Will clutches at Hannibal's hair, the edge of the table, whatever he can reach.

" *Fuck* , Hannibal," he gasps out, bucking up with more purpose.

More words leak out, *so good* and *please* , and he can't stop any of them.

But while he knows Hannibal is enjoying mouthing at him, sucking against his skin, Will wants him to feel *more*. Will has been passively receptive once today already, and he doesn't want that again. Wants to make not just an offering of himself to be savored, but an active

source of pleasure. So he makes himself focus on undressing Hannibal once more, and he rolls his hips so that his ass presses against Hannibal's groin, an invitation.

"Come on," he pants.

At Will's desperate plea and deliberate push, Hannibal jerks his grip in Will's hair, drags his chin up to bare the blooming stretch of his throat. He grinds slowly, deliberately, before moving his other hand to work Will's trousers off.

And then he stops. Freezes, entirely.

Will's belly trembles as he tries not to move either, suddenly afraid Hannibal will spook. His hand in Hannibal's hair gentles. Slides forward to cup his cheek. He searches Hannibal's face for something, some explanation, some *hint* as to what's just changed.

"Stay with me," he murmurs, and slowly shifts so he can meet the other man's gaze. "Where have you gone?"

Just as quietly, expression softening, Hannibal answers, "Nowhere. Where else do I have to go?"

"We don't have to," Will says. "If something is wrong—if this isn't what you want—"

There is something broken inside of Hannibal. There is inside most people, but Will is starting to find the edges of this particular break. The death of his sister, and the circumstances under which Hannibal discovered how to possess a man to save his own life, and something else, something jagged and deep. There's fear, there. Will can't name what Hannibal is afraid of, but he can feel it.

But Hannibal comes away from it. Comes back to Will and kisses him, long and slow, tongue and heat. Will's heart gives a stunned little flutter, which turns into a full body shiver as Hannibal slips the bandages free from around his stomach and follows with his mouth.

Hungry ? he almost asks, but he can only stare.

Hannibal dips his face to the perfect line of raised teeth marks. A watercolor palette of bruises and welts that he runs a cheek along, stubble rasping over the sensitive flesh, before flicking his tongue into the deepest puncture, the first one that had bled when the chain was laid.

He slides his gaze up to Will and presses more insistently, pushing his tongue as deep as it will go.

Will's breath hitches as he watches, rapt. "That shouldn't feel good," he breathes.

But it does.

Maybe not in the strictest physical sense, but there's some kind of alchemy between Hannibal's desires and Will's understanding of them, maybe just lingering dream logic but—

It makes his cock twitch. Makes his heartbeat quicken. It's obscene, watching Hannibal tongue at the wound, and Will can't look away.

Hannibal's hands trace patterns up and down Will's sides light enough to make him shiver, and then he sinks to his knees and frees Will entirely from the trousers and underclothes. He eases Will's thighs further apart and sets his heels firmly on the table. And then he presses back in, close, and licks a long, wet stripe over Will's hole.

Will spasms in surprise, and pushes up on his elbows to watch.

Because if Hannibal tonguing at the bite marks was obscene, this is—this is—

"Hannibal," he breathes, and he means it to be a question, but then Hannibal's tongue moves again and he can't remember to be confused in the wake of the shock of pleasure up his spine. He falls back onto the table, biting down on a whimper.

His tongue is indolent and exploratory, dipping in to press him open. It's almost too much, and then Hannibal is gripping Will's cock, too, first a brush of teasing fingers and then faster with each deeper press of tongue, and it's definitely too much, but it's too perfect to tell him to stop.

Will is trembling on the edge when Hannibal stands, hand slowing. "Stay," he murmurs, voice as rough and wrecked as Will feels.

"Yeah," Will manages, and watches, trembling, as Hannibal goes over to the counter. "I didn't—I had no idea that was even a thing."

Hannibal retrieves the bottle of olive oil and washes his mouth out at the tap, and Will fights to slow his heaving breaths.

"I'm honored to be the one to introduce you to it, then," Hannibal murmurs, returning to the table.

He coats his fingers liberally and eases one into Will, capturing Will's gasp with his mouth.

This Will has marginally more experience with, albeit only at his own hand. But he knows how to relax into it, even as the sensation is almost entirely different. He can't predict how Hannibal will move, and that unknowing is delicious. He tangles a hand back in Hannibal's hair as he kisses him and rocks his hips. The other hand goes to Hannibal's throat, to the Mark, and he pushes just enough to be felt. Just enough to feel it himself, to feel it echo in his chest.

Hannibal works him open gradually. One finger becomes two, then three, each progression faster than the last, until he uses his free hand to get his own trousers down just enough.

He slicks up his own cock and starts to press slowly inside.

Will goes almost still, lips parted, hands gentling. He stills, save his hitching breath and trembling thighs as he resists the urge to barrel on ahead. He wants to savor this. Memorize it.

He lets out a broken sound when Hannibal is at last fully seated.

Together. They're together, blurring, conjoined.

It's only then that he shifts to curl his legs around Hannibal, that his hands tighten again, and he drags Hannibal down for a deep, searching kiss.

Hannibal grips Will's hips, bracing, and he begins to move.

That knocks loose a low moan, breathed into Hannibal's mouth without shame. Will tilts his hips to welcome Hannibal into him. It's so different from Hannibal being inside his mind, but no less powerful, reminding him with every thrust how alive he'd felt in that closet, every inch of him awakened and ready and yearning.

He's been yearning for so long, for somebody who sees him and doesn't think he's a freak or too difficult, someone he can lose himself in and still come out the other side himself. More himself than he's ever felt before.

He slides the hand on Hannibal's throat up until it cradles his jaw. Holds him where Will wants him as Will's tongue delves deeper, and for a moment, it's like they're consuming each other, so deep within the other that daylight doesn't matter anymore.

Hannibal snaps his hips, pushing closer and closer to the edge.

The roil of pleasure in Will condenses to a few bright, shining points. He's close, so close, but he hangs on. He wants to watch Hannibal fall apart. His hips work in tight little thrusts, matching Hannibal's rhythm, returning what he's given.

Between them, the bites on Will's belly sting with friction. It does nothing to slow him.

Will mouths over Hannibal's cheekbone, to his bitten ear, and now it makes sense, why he'd want to do that. He tongues at the scab, sucks the lobe into his mouth, and bites again.

Blood runs hot over his lips, more than he expected, and Hannibal gets a hand between them, but not to push him away. No, he wraps his perfect fingers around Will's cock and jerks him, hard and fast, before he buries himself deep and comes. Will barely has time to witness the absolutely vulnerable perfection of it before he cries out, bucking under Hannibal as he follows him into oblivion.

There's blood in his mouth and down his throat. The bite marks on his stomach scream, and it's all perfect, absolutely perfect. A catharsis of the soul, or something like it, and Will pulls Hannibal to him, still rocking with the aftershocks. Presses kisses to his throat, the both of them streaked with blood.

Hannibal goes down to the table with him, burying his nose into Will's curls as Will's lips move lazily over his throat. Eventually, he tears himself away to lay his palm over the Mark and Will's beating heart, biting one last kiss from his mouth before pulling out.

He bends to lick Will's stomach clean —*thoroughly, minding his bites*— and gives the head of his cock the same treatment until Will shivers and moans, the sound rough and sharp-edged. When Hannibal pulls back, Will eases himself up to sitting, gazing at him with naked adoration. His eyes flick to the side of Hannibal's head.

"I'd apologize, but it felt important to do that properly, while I was aware of it," Will says, softly. He hesitates, then adds, "I think it actually tastes better for it."

"Does it?" Hannibal says dryly —*of course it does; those words stoke something low and smoldering inside him.* He smiles. The slightly hazy look on Will's face pulls it out of him.

—*yours, he thinks, and it's all he can think; yours; even if he went to his knees in cuffs, dragged before the Inquisitors, even all at Wills hand; yours, yours, yours, and it aches*—

"I would gladly wear your bite marks — though in your awareness I'd have preferred something slightly less noticeable."

Will winces, then looks notably sheepish. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't think about that. Is it bad?"

"I believe you'll have to be the judge of that," Hannibal answers.

He tucks himself back into his trousers and noses around Will's kitchen until he finds a clean rag to run under the tap, wash off his hands, and bring back to the table. He slides between Will's legs again and licks his mouth clean —*you never forget the taste of your own blood but it tastes different off Will's skin and after a curse from that mouth.* When he pulls away, Hannibal presses the cloth into Will's hands and turns his head so he can see the bite.

Will dabs at it first, then cleans with more intention. After a minute or so, he says, "Small tear. But not so big that it needs stitches, I think?"

Hannibal hums his appreciation. "It can be difficult to stitch an ear. We'll leave it be for now."

He returns to Will's mouth instead with light, slow kisses, and skates his touch up and down Will's sides. Will tosses the cloth to the table and leans into the kiss, just lightly enough that he won't muss Hannibal's clothing with any lingering bodily fluids.

There's a knock at the door.

Will stiffens, then swears and squirms out of Hannibal's arms, grabbing at his discarded clothing. Hannibal lets him go and searches for his own shirt and cravat —*hardly panicked; unlike Will, he holds it in better check, but curiosity and teeth-bared irritation war inside him instead.* He knots his cravat the best he can by feel.

"Do you often get unexpected visitors at this hour?" he asks, the picture of calm —*he is going to kill whoever is on the other side of that door*— and smooths a hand over his hair, then brushes a quick finger over his ear. Scabbing, but no longer wet; no need to break out the gauze.

“It’s Crawford,” Will says, grimacing, even as he gets himself more or less into his clothes. “Go upstairs if you don’t want him to know you’re here. He usually doesn’t come inside but if he does, I’ll take him to the sitting room up front.”

He glances at Hannibal, then reaches out to adjust his cravat. Hannibal is thoroughly charmed and lets him fix it *—a small thing, hardly matters; it feels like the earth shifting under his feet.* He neglects to point out that the overwhelming smell of sex currently hanging heavy over the kitchen may find its way to the sitting room *—but only he can smell himself on Will; or in Will, as the case may be.*

There’s another loud, insistent series of knocks.

“My bag is in the sitting room,” Hannibal says and draws a burning look down Will’s neck; there’s marks there going deep red that the collar can’t quite hide. “Jack knows I make house calls; I see little point in keeping my presence from him. Unless you wish to hide me.”

“I don’t,” Will says, after a brief pause, and with a firm shake of his head. “He might just not trust you to be objective regarding me, that’s all.”

He manages a quick smile, then takes off for the door.

Tonight, Jack Crawford does feel guilty for dragging Will Graham from his bedrest.

Only slightly. A fleeting iota of guilt, but it’s there. He feels it. And that’s what counts.

It evaporates by the time he’s pounding on the door for the third time, more fist than knuckles. He’s considering the downsides of shouting case details through the door when it finally swings open. On a good day, Will Graham is disheveled, unsteady, and grimacing. Tonight he looks all of that and more. He looks...undone. Suspiciously so. It doesn’t take a trained investigator to notice that. Or the marks on his neck, not quite hidden by collar or hairline. Clearly new — they haven’t reached lividity yet.

Frankly, he doesn’t have time for that. He puts it aside.

“Is this a bad time?” Jack asks, then before Will can answer, says, “Good, it’s about to get worse. Abel Gideon escaped.”

Will opens his mouth, shuts it again, opens it, shuts it.

"That is bad," he says, at last.

“Yes it is,” Jack agrees, trying to sound as patient as he can. “They sent word to the department as soon as someone noticed he was missing, but it seems he was left under minimal observation for hours before that. We have three confirmed dead and one injured. She was carried to the hospital but it looks grim.”

Will glances towards the department’s carriage parked a little ways down the street and when he looks back at Jack, he’s frowning. He always seems to be frowning or smiling in a way that might as well be a frown with how much it cuts. Jack understands the sentiment.

“You should be coordinating search teams,” Will says. He sounds tired and irritated, but Jack knows wariness on him when he sees it.

“And you should be in bed,” he counters. “You were one of the last people to speak with Dr. Gideon outside of the asylum staff. Did you get any indication that he might be planning something?”

Will crosses his arms. “You think I wouldn’t have told you if I did.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” Jack presses.

“Abel Gideon believes he is someone else, which entirely changes the way he thinks.” Will drags a hand over his face and then gives a half-hearted shrug. “You’d have to ask him.”

Will doesn’t look like he has time for this. He looks distracted and sounds it too. And not the useful kind of distracted, either, not the kind that steals over him at crime scenes and ends up with him relaying critical, if disturbing insights.

(Not that Jack minds. He can deal with disturbing.)

He says, “I’m asking you.”

“You’re the inspector here, Jack,” Will snaps. Definitely irritated now; usually Will avoids his given name reflexively, out of some misguided attempt at propriety. “Why don’t you come up with your own answers if you don’t like mine?”

“Because Gideon had the run of Chilton’s office before he got out of the building. And he decided to leave the good doctor a message.” Jack points at him and fixes him with a warning look. “And I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

At that Will stands straighter, but he knows it’s not because of the warning. Jack resists the urge to smile outright, now that he’s got his attention. Graham isn’t the only decent fisherman on this doorstep.

Finally, Will relents. “You could have led with the message.”

Jack shakes his head. “You would’ve refused me outright.”

“Probably,” he agrees.

The longer Jack looks at Will, the more he notices the sheen of his forehead, the sleepless pallor of his skin, the slump in his shoulders. He had originally just assumed the last couple of crime scenes had particularly shaken him, but maybe there was some truth to the illness.

“You don’t look well,” he acknowledges. Small steps. “Do I need to be officially concerned, Graham?”

“I thought keeping your concern *un* official was the point of sending Dr. Lecter to see me with no warning,” Will answers, an edge of derision in his voice. Jack’s lip twitches; this

overtly rude side of Will is new. Will looks away from him and adds, “He just adjusted my medical regimen. Might help.“

Might.

Jack doesn’t want to hear *might.* It’s somewhat of a point of pride, wringing usefulness out of Will. Carefully bringing him up to that edge and then pulling him back again. It’s necessary. But he’s never had any interest in breaking Will.

Will clears his throat. “What was the message?”

“You’ll have to see it for yourself,” he says. Then his brain catches up. *Just* pings around inside his skull trying to find a place to land (*just, just, just*). He knows firsthand that Dr. Lecter’s schedule is a nightmare to navigate. There’s no way Will is part of his normal rounds this quickly. After hours, then. “Is Dr. Lecter here?”

Will freezes. Jack’s brows creep up.

“Yes,” Will says, eyes averted. “We were just finishing dinner.”

Jack’s more than used to Will Graham not looking at him. There’s two different ways for him to do it—the less-pointed way that dissipates the tension from his face and the way that screams avoidance. Or lying.

This is the second one.

Strictly, there’s no reason to lie about Dr. Lecter. Jack has had many a dinner with him. There’s no reason for Will to cover up medical treatment when Jack knows about the bedrest. Unless...

His eyes move to Will’s throat again. Maybe it was a different kind of dinner.

He decides to let it go. For now. He has plenty of questions for Dr. Lecter.

“Good,” Jack says quickly, eager to move on from that train of thought. “Invite him along. We could use a former surgeon’s opinion on this. The department’s bringing in the Inquisitors. Georgia Madchen, the Ripper murder, now Gideon. Too many things happening at once and they don’t like coincidences.”

When Will doesn’t immediately move, he slips his hands into his pockets and nods inside. “Well, go on. I’m not waiting here forever.”

“Right,” Will says. “Wait here.”

He closes the door in Jack’s face.

While Will answers the door, Hannibal sets to cleaning up dinner and sinking into the impossibility of having fucked Will Graham on his own kitchen table. He always keeps his

promises and kissing Will senseless in his lap on this same floor only days ago had felt almost like one.

Eventually, Will returns, looking uncomfortable and somehow more rumpled than he had when he'd left.

"Crawford wants you to come with us," he says when he comes back into the kitchen. "Chilton's patient, Abel Gideon—he's on the loose, and we have multiple deaths."

"A summons from Jack Crawford?" Hannibal says with a narrow smile. "How could I refuse?"

He crosses the kitchen to Will and makes no move to hide the thorough look he sweeps down his body and back up again. He tilts his head, questioning. "Are you going to change?"

Will sighs and runs a hand through his already wild curls. "I probably should. Might be a long night. Can you—that is, would you distract Crawford to give me some time?"

Hannibal nods. As Will makes a hasty retreat upstairs, Hannibal retrieves his bag from the sitting room and stops by the hall mirror. His hair is mostly in order and his throat covered but there's nothing to be done about his ear—*and the rather damning look of his mouth*. Eventually, he heads out onto the stoop to meet Jack Crawford.

Jack, buttoned up against the chill of oncoming night in his dark wool coat and wide-brimmed hat, stands and regards him with such a pointed look that Hannibal nearly takes a step back. Instead, he shuts the door and tilts his head curiously.

"I hear Dr. Chilton has lost track of a patient," he says.

Jack eyes him. "And you seem to have gained one."

"Will is a patient of circumstance," Hannibal corrects. "I'm not officially his doctor."

"I suppose that makes the bedrest unofficial too?"

The way Jack's tone moves around *bedrest* tells him all he needs to know; the investigator suspects. This is an interrogation.

Hannibal simply gives him a placid look in return. "You can hardly blame the physician you sent for doing what physicians do, Jack. I looked in on him at your behest. You must know that every new crime scene puts Will in a potentially destructive environment."

"He catches killers. I'd rather Graham go a little mad or get a little ill than some innocent lose their life. And I think Graham would rather that, too," Jack protests. He sighs and for a stretch, neither of them say anything. "You can't be objective about this."

It seems Jack Crawford is not blind to *everything* regarding him. If he's looking for a secret being kept from him, it would be strategic to give him one.

“Objectivity or my lack of it doesn’t stop biological facts like fevers,” Hannibal says. “You are hardly the shining beacon of impartiality yourself. It serves you to violate his bedrest orders, so you do, and justify it with the lives you save.”

Jack barks out a laugh but some part of it is hollow. “Is that not good enough justification?”

“Will’s an innocent, too. What about his life?”

“I know he is going to survive,” Jack says. Adamant. “He’ll always come back to being Will.”

He returns to searching Hannibal’s expression. The lines between investigator and friend have always been strange and blurry between him and Jack, in a way that he has never questioned but nonetheless has presented complications *—enemy and close friend, each held in one hand.*

Finally Jack says, “Are you going to make me ask?”

Hannibal lets out a breath, as if this is a secret that has been weighing on him *—it hasn’t, particularly; the existence of secrets reflexively kept from Jack Crawford is a fact of life.*

“You know.”

“Of course *I know*. Observing is what I *do* for a living.” Jack shakes his head. “He said you kept him overnight for observation, doctor. At your own house. He said that and all I could remember was when Bella needed a night of observation, it was you who came to us.”

There might have been more to the interrogation, had they not heard the faint sound of Will coming back down the stairs. The door opens, and Will steps out onto his now-crowded stoop. With his coat on, and his hat, he looks almost respectable—except, of course, for the bruises on his throat that still peek out over the high collar of his fresh shirt. He doesn't look between Hannibal or Jack, instead opting to fuss a little more than necessary with the lock.

"Well?" Will asks when he's done. "Shall we?"

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Hannibal's Mark flares with discomfort as the Inquisitor moves away from the chandelier kidney to walk a slow half circle around him and Will—just as keenly interested in the two of them as the bodies at their feet. Finally, they drop into a crouch beside the attendant with his back flayed open and draw a gloved finger down the body's blood-splattered spine.

"At the Ministry, we take years to hone our expert opinions, same as any surgeon and their craft. We learn to read the weave of events in the world, learn to recognize the threads of chaos by sight, by feel, by gut instinct alone. In my estimation, there is an imprint of disorder here. This room is alive with it. So yes, Inspector, divining heresy takes a finely tuned mind." The Inquisitor slides their gaze up and directly to Will. "Or a certain kind of madness."

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An Inquisitor visits the crime scene. Hannibal and Will hatch a plan. Abel Gideon has a dream.

Will has never had a more uncomfortable carriage ride in his life. Something about the way Crawford looks at him (and Hannibal) screams that he knows, absolutely, what the two of them had been up to just minutes before he knocked. Even if that hadn't been the case, Will's body definitely knows. Each jolt of the carriage is a small torture.

He's spared small talk, at least.

When they finally arrive at the gates of the asylum, it's almost a relief. (Almost, but not entirely; the building never fails to make his skin crawl.) Will exits the carriage as soon as it comes to a stop at the main entrance, where several of Crawford's men are stationed—along with two Inquisitors in scowling masks. With an inward wince, he realizes he forgot to warn Hannibal.

The carriage's suspension creaks as Crawford gets out behind him. "Where do you want me to start?" Will asks without turning around.

"Dr. Chilton's office on the third floor," Jack says. "I'll take you up."

Hannibal exits the carriage last, and Will does look back to catch his glance at the Inquisitors. A mild look, unconcerned except for the slight pause their presence might elicit in any civilian.

Will reminds himself that Hannibal has far more experience hiding what he is.

“Right,” he says, and shoves his spectacles onto his face.

As Jack takes the lead, Hannibal comes up to Will’s side and the two of them cross into the asylum together. Low, so that only Will can hear, Hannibal says, “Not fond of hospitals?”

“Not fond of asylums,” he corrects, scowling briefly before reining his expression back to a general sort of unhappiness. “Never entirely sure they’re going to let me leave.”

“Rest assured, Will, I would not leave you here.”

The relief that washes over him leaves him feeling vulnerable, so he turns his attention to Crawford instead. “Where’s Chilton?”

“At home with two of my men and an Inquisitor guarding his door. He had gone home for the evening when Gideon freed himself from his restraints,” Jack answers, leading them up a wide set of stairs. When they cross onto the second floor the halls are eerily quiet, no sign of patients or staff. Usually, there’s at least an echo of sobbing. Wailing. Chilton’s treatments are not kind. “Our victims are two attendants and Chilton’s secretary.”

“And the one who was found alive?”

“A nurse, most likely injured incidentally in the escape. Not part of the display, at any rate.”

“And the rest—all in one room?” Will asks and Jack nods. “Did anybody see anything during the event?”

“During? No,” says Jack as the three of them reach the third floor and head down the wide hallway. He pulls out a small notebook, creases it open, and gives it a quick glance. “But one of the staff saw someone dressed in an attendant's smock leaving through a door near the kitchens. That seemed unusual to her because medical staff tend to leave on the opposite side of the building near the offices.”

Almost certainly Gideon, but it won’t help them find him. Will fusses with his glasses as he approaches the scene, feeling himself begin to sink, feeling his focus narrow. His own fears of imprisonment fade. Even if Hannibal hadn’t reassured him, he wouldn’t be frightened anymore. The work simplifies everything. Puts all his personal agonies away into a locked box.

What’s left doesn’t need further information from Crawford. He’ll know when he sees it.

Jack brings him and Hannibal through a doorway and into a small outer office, outfitted with a wall-to-wall bank of mail shelves, a simple desk, and a typewriter. Zeller stands outside the closed door to the inner office, Chilton’s gold-lettered name stamped into the frosted glass.

Both Jack and Zeller automatically step aside. Will notices, vaguely, that they’re both looking at Hannibal, not him.

Zeller clears his throat and says, “You might want to brace yourself, doctor.”

“I’m familiar with the butchery of surgeons,” Hannibal says, behind him. “And I have a rather strong stomach.”

His voice is distant. Muffled. Will’s already reaching for the door, moving through it.

He removes his spectacles and finds himself in a phantasmagoric landscape.

The floor is tacky with blood, the walls all but painted with it. The white and gold furniture Chilton prefers is ruined, irreversibly tainted. From the ceiling and the bookshelves hang organs suspended on garlands of vein and artery, twisting gently as the movement of the door causes the smallest of breezes. They do not glisten; too long out of the body for that. But as Will sinks into himself, he sees them as they were: freshly excised by a skilled hand, beautiful and useless offal, no answers to be found anywhere.

No answers, no answers, no answers.

The empty husks of Gideon's victims ring the room. One is draped across Chilton's chair. Not the secretary, just one of the asylum toughs; that's a pointed blow at Chilton, but otherwise meaningless. It's all meaningless, moving dolls around in the unmet hope that new configurations will provide new answers. Time moves backwards, and he is vivisecting the secretary. He takes her tongue and her liver. He tries to feel the Ripper, but he is alone.

He's waiting for a voice. Nothing speaks to him.

The two orderlies weren't murdered here. Only the secretary. And only the secretary was murdered with such cruelty. An experiment. The others are, as Gideon's previous murders were, effective and blunt. He only wanted them dead, he didn't want to lavish attention on their dying.

There is almost a rage to it. A frustration that he has to kill. That they can't just be *dead* already.

His head is loud, loud, *loud,* but it produces no insight, no answers.

Who am I?

Seeing Will work firsthand is nothing like hearing him describe it. Where in the kitchen, he was vibrant and eager, here he is entirely silent. His gaze is startlingly focused, yet fixed on nothing in particular, spectacles held loose at his side. His fingers twitch, curl with aborted movement, but the rest of him is marble-still. While Will is occupied, Hannibal takes in the room, lip curling in disdain —*there really is blood everywhere; getting it on his shoes is inevitable*.

A spike of irritation goes through him. For the number of the Ripper’s many careful displays Chilton had been previously called upon to analyze, somehow he still persists in attributing them to a man who would artlessly splatter-paint an office in red.

He ducks out of the way of a lobe of liver strung up by the spreading arms of the hepatic vein and a thick section of inferior vena cava. The knots are simple and hardly meant to hold the organ's weight long term —*and nothing like the intricate ones he'd found in Will's flies.*

Will makes a noise, then, something like a half-contained snarl. Hannibal glances back, to find him scrubbing at his face, pushing at his temples, working his jaw.

"Abel Gideon," he says, "is not getting the answers he's owed. So he's trying to find them himself."

"What sort of answers does he imagine Dr. Chilton denied him?" Hannibal asks.

Will's gaze focuses and flits to Hannibal. If he's relieved that Jack isn't with them, it doesn't show, subsumed in his single-minded concentration.

"Chilton convinced Gideon he was the Ripper. Gideon now knows he's not—this is the confirmation—but he doesn't know who he *is*. He's experimenting and coming up empty." Will doesn't come to him, so Hannibal goes to his side instead. "Crawford was right to put Chilton under guard. He'll be going after everybody who has stolen his certainty from him."

"Who else has taken pieces of Dr. Gideon?"

"Other psychologists and alienists have dealt with him in the past. So have some of Chilton's medical colleagues. He likely blames them all." Will's expression suddenly sours. "Dr. Bloom as well. And me, arguably."

And me. All it takes is those two syllables, one moment of decision. Hannibal must find Dr. Gideon before Jack's team.

He leaves Will's side to pick his way to the nearest of the bodies and crouch down beside it. The inner corner of the secretary's right eye-socket is awash in blood, both nasal and lacrimal bones crushed in. Hannibal notes Will's quiet steps, then feels Will's shoulder knock into his own when he crouches too.

Hannibal nods down at the victim. "This was a rather poor attempt at lobotomization. At our last dinner together, Dr. Chilton mentioned getting a visit from a travelling practitioner of that...particular art. He turned him away, but perhaps not without threatening some of his more stubborn inmates. The removal of the tongue, however, is plagiarism, given what you told me of the most recent Ripper murder."

"She was alive for all of it," Will says, frowning. "Possibly he realized what the Ripper must have as well—the lack of a tongue doesn't stop a woman from screaming. But the lack of a brain…" He shrugs. "Or he gave her what he can't have. Blissful ignorance. Or both."

"Ignorance can be an antidote to certain kinds of pain. Perhaps Gideon can be persuaded into small acts of mercy," Hannibal says. He looks away from the secretary —*the lack of artistry is frankly offensive; there is some element of effort here but he is loath to reward it*— and back to Will. "It's a terrible thing to have your identity taken from you."

Pain creases Will's brow, but before Hannibal can ask after it, there is a brusque knock at the door to the office. It swings open without waiting for acknowledgment. Hannibal looks up, expecting Jack Crawford here to demand Will's interpretation, but a thunderously masked Inquisitor looms in his place.

Will's voice is less than calm when he snaps, "This crime scene hasn't been released yet."

"This crime scene is officially under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Order, Inspector Graham," the Inquisitor replies, stepping into the office. The mask distorts their voice, turning it echoing and harsh. "You are here on our sufferance."

Will doesn't move, merely looks back down at the secretary. Hannibal, curious, stands. In his line of work, he's never had the opportunity to talk with an Inquisitor *—or the misfortune as the case may be.* He takes in the deep scowl frozen onto the brass mouth of the infamous mask, catches just a glimpse of a bright green gaze through the eye holes.

A suspicious gaze. Naturally.

"We would be more than happy to leave the room to you," Hannibal says with a look back down at Will. "I believe Inspector Graham was just finishing up."

Will's scowl deepens, but he shoves his spectacles back on. "More or less," he mutters.

He gets to his feet, but Hannibal watches the Inquisitor, who looks past them for the first time and takes in the room, the blood, the suspended organs. He follows their gaze to a kidney, gently swaying on a tangle of its own blood vessels. His Mark gives a rather pointed shiver as the Inquisitor's eyes narrow within the depths of the mask.

Hannibal rather pointedly ignores it *—his fascination has always trumped his own discomfort.*

The Inquisitor moves forward to stand under the organ, their heavy boots peeling up blood with every sticky step. "And what have you gleaned from your analysis?"

Will looks distinctly unhappy at the idea of reporting to anybody but Crawford, but his good sense appears to at last be taking the reins. He keeps his gaze averted. "Our killer is unsure of who he is. This was both an experiment and an insult to Dr. Chilton. He will likely keep killing until he reaches an answer that satisfies him."

"Is that likely? A madman discovering an answer in a trail of corpses?" The Inquisitor says. "Is there any evidence that Dr. Gideon is Marked?"

"*No*," Will snaps, immediately, with all the righteous frustration of a man insulted by how poorly his audience grasps what is in front of them. Hannibal looks quickly over at him as he almost continues, then seems to catch himself.

The Inquisitor turns to Will as well. Will goes a little pale.

"No," he reiterates, less harshly now, turning away from the Inquisitor and to the other body on the floor. An attendant, facedown and lower back butterflied open to better extract the

kidneys —*open but unimportant; Will pointing the Inquisitor in an unrelated direction*. “He’s not going to find answers, or at least, not logical ones. As for the rest, isn't divining heresy your department?”

Even with someone as dangerous as an Inquisitor in the room, Will still can’t quite keep the bite out of his words. Hannibal resists the urge to smile.

Before the Inquisitor can speak, Hannibal steps in once more —*and he can feel the anger seething off of them*. “I agree with Inspector Graham. That is hardly our area. However, we would welcome a chance to hear *your* analysis.” He gives them a pleased look. “I imagine it would be very educational.”

The Inquisitor’s attention shifts to him —*and, more importantly, off Will.* Their voice is all ice. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. Who are you exactly?”

“A former surgeon, same as Abel Gideon, and invited here to offer my expert opinion, same as you,” he answers, keeping every word neutral. Unconfrontational.

Hannibal’s Mark flares with discomfort as the Inquisitor moves away from the chandelier kidney to walk a slow half circle around him and Will —*just as keenly interested in the two of them as the bodies at their feet*. Finally, they drop into a crouch beside the attendant with his back flayed open and draw a gloved finger down the body’s blood-splattered spine.

“At the Ministry, we take years to hone our expert opinions, same as any surgeon and their craft. We learn to read the weave of events in the world, learn to recognize the threads of chaos by sight, by feel, by gut instinct alone. In my estimation, there is an imprint of disorder here. This room is alive with it. So yes, Inspector, *divining heresy* takes a finely tuned mind.” The Inquisitor slides their gaze up and directly to Will. “Or a certain kind of madness.”

Hannibal also looks to Will, expecting him to turn inside himself or bite back at the implication of his madness —*Will, who fears they won’t let him out of this place.* But Will’s expression is entirely collected, still his but quiet as the surface of a lake, undisturbed and mirror-smooth.

“Abel Gideon thought he was the Ripper,” he says, an analytical olive branch. “And if anybody in this city is Marked, I’d lay odds it’s him. Gideon imitates the Ripper’s most recent kill, and we get an echo of chaos. Assuming it can work that way.”

The Inquisitor stands, clasping their bloodied hands behind their back. “Assuming it can, then Abel Gideon is in a precarious state. Once a soul is touched by the Unnamed’s influence, the resulting stain is known to…metastasize. He will become more erratic."

“Pretty sure he was headed that way anyway,” Will murmurs.

“It’s exceedingly difficult to predict where metastatic cells will spread, and more difficult still to cut them out.” Hannibal locks eyes with the Inquisitor. “Even the most aggressive surgery can’t always remove them all.”

“Indeed.” Their gaze flashes. “Perhaps you can inform Inspector Crawford that his team is no longer needed here and that he should begin to coordinate search parties immediately.”

The dismissal in their voice is crystal clear. Will makes for the door before Hannibal, who lingers just a moment before heading back out into the outer office *—he’s still elated that when push came to shove, Will did what needed to be done.* The small antechamber is deserted, not even a sergeant standing guard. Hannibal emerges into the hallway and nearly runs into Will, standing stock still and explicitly avoiding eye contact with Jack.

“— since when do you talk to Inquisitors like that? I expect that sort of thing directed at me, but to *them.* Tread very carefully, Will,” Jack says, then fixes Hannibal with a look. “You were in there with him and you let those words come out of his mouth?”

Hannibal moves one shoulder, noncommittal. “I trust Will to speak for himself.”

“Evidently you shouldn’t.” Jack turns his attention back to Will. “I’ve sent officers to Dr. Bloom’s residence and I’m about to send some home with you.”

Will doesn’t acknowledge the chiding look aimed at him. “I don’t want them.”

“Too bad, you and Dr. Bloom were the last two people to interview Gideon. If you say he’s going to keep killing people who messed with his head, who’s to say his list is going to end with Dr. Chilton?”

“Will is hardly the same as Dr. Chilton or Dr. Bloom,” Hannibal says. “Who’s to say Dr. Gideon even remembers him at all?”

“You’re going to need all hands on deck to find him,” Will adds. “Catch him faster and he hurts fewer people.”

Jack lets out a long breath and shuts his eyes as if he doesn’t want to look at either of them at the moment. “Fine. It seems I have search parties to coordinate. Both of you just stay where I can find you, understood?”

He leaves before either Hannibal or Will can agree. Hannibal turns to Will, whose attention is once again firmly elsewhere, and hooks a finger under his chin, tilts his face up to chase his faraway gaze. His Mark gives a pleasant thrum at the contact. A relief, after the close scrutiny in the office.

“Dr. Gideon isn’t the only one chasing certainty,” Hannibal says quietly.

Will comes back more gently this time. “No,” Will agrees. He searches Hannibal’s face, then casts a look around to where more Inquisitors are coming down the hall. “We should go somewhere private. There’s something I need your opinion on.”

Hannibal nods. He heads down the main stairs to the second floor, Will close behind him, and makes for the very end of the long hall to the right, where a window looks out over the gardens. The two of them duck into the small stone alcove. It’s a tight fit, barely room between them, but it will muffle their conversation, keep it away from curious ears.

He sends a casual look around. “Difficult to interrupt us here.”

“I wouldn’t say this counts as somewhere Crawford can find us.” Will sighs and leans back against the wall, eyes dropping to Hannibal’s waistcoat. “The other day, I told you I…used Gideon’s surgical knowledge to help you.” His gaze flicks to Hannibal’s wrists.

“And now you are concerned you may have influenced him in some way. Because of the theory you gave the Inquisitor?”

“Among other things,” Will says. “That was almost a disaster.”

“As peeking behind the curtain can often be. Unlike you, I haven’t had the privilege of seeing the Inquisitors going about their business firsthand.” Hannibal doesn’t even try to bite back his smile. “*Inspector* Graham.”

Will laughs, and it’s only a little bleak. “A convenient simplification,” he says. “They’ve never asked. Besides, *Consulting Inspector Graham* is a bit of a mouthful, don’t you think?”

Hannibal replies, “No more than *Detective Inspector Crawford.*”

“Yeah, but that at least sounds impressive.” Will smiles again, briefly, and then he sighs, rubs at his jaw. “Look, that day. Before I sent him away, the double of Gideon—spoke to me. None of the others ever have. He said I owed him payment in answers. That has to be—a question from my own psyche, I’m sure, but I worry with the speaking, and now with this massacre…”

He trails off, grimacing.

“You fear there’s something more going on. That the real Gideon knows,” Hannibal finishes *—so this is Will’s piece of Dr. Gideon; a preoccupation, an understanding, a double*. He tilts his head, thinking. “Without some preternatural ability, I’m not certain he could. And fumbling as he may be, Frederick has little respect for privacy. He would have inspected every inch of Abel Gideon upon admission.”

Not every Mark is obvious, but he doubts Gideon has anything in common with the two of them. Still, side effects of contact with a Marked person can be variable. Will’s fears may not be entirely unfounded.

Hannibal reaches out for him *—a hold that is becoming a habit: thumb brushing the curls by his ear, fingers spread to cup the back of his head—* and adds, “What answers do you feel you’re owed, Will?”

A bitter, melancholic humor passes over Will’s face, a smile that is more flinch than anything else. “Too many.”

Who am I becoming? Where do I go from here? How long until the Inquisitors realize they’re looking for me?

His body is still a live wire from the encounter at the crime scene. He can feel the weight of the Inquisitor's appraising stare still, and the heat of Hannibal's body is as much a reminder of the danger they're both in as it is a comfort. Will shivers, drops his voice to a whisper. "I don't think he's… preternatural, but he *is* still alive. The others aren't. If I've—if a channel has opened, it stands to reason that it goes both ways."

Eyes closing, he leans into Hannibal's hand, arms crossed over his chest in some vague attempt at self comfort.

"He asked, *Who am I*?" he murmurs. "Just like up at the crime scene. And just like when I dreamed of him last night. Again and again, *Who am I* ?"

"You dreamed of him?" Hannibal asks, the gentle pressure of his hand never changing.

Will focuses on the movement of a thumb over the soft sliver of skin in front of his ear, grounding, soothing. His breathing eases a fraction. "Not intentionally. I spoke to Georgia Madchen first, but her dream overwhelmed me. One of my doubles saved me from drowning. Pulled me out and asked that question. It might have been him. Might have just been something from my own mind. Dream logic."

"If you spoke to her, you may be able to find him as well," Hannibal says. "Give him a message. Make a request of your own. In our most vulnerable moments, we seek out others. Their understanding of us may be a waypoint, a harbor in troubled waters. I imagine from the moment you spoke with him you knew he wasn't the Ripper. And he could tell."

Will can recall every detail of his last trip to this asylum, sitting across a table from Abel Gideon. He had not been kind, trying to disillusion the man. And Gideon is a proud man; perhaps this day was always coming. Perhaps this blood was always going to be on his hands.

As if he can hear the dark trend of Will's thoughts, Hannibal strokes more firmly along the line of his jaw, pulling him back. "You can't tell him who he is," Hannibal murmurs, "but you know what it is like to not feel like yourself."

Will can still fix this.

"You really think I should reach out to him when I go to sleep?" he asks. (Which will be soon; he's exhausted from his day, and even though he can't feel the aching of his head anymore, he certainly doesn't feel *well*.)

"Abel Gideon seems to be more a butcher of opportunity, not a hunter, but always he is a predator. You are a fisherman. I don't doubt you can set a convincing lure, enough to get him somewhere for Jack to find," Hannibal says, voice warm, as if he's smiling.

Will opens his eyes at last, and yes, Hannibal is looking down at him with such affection. It's soothing even as it makes Will feel ashamed at the strength of the faith Hannibal has in him. "And what happens if it works? If he remembers it when he wakes? If he figures out what *I* am?"

Hannibal's face sobers. "It pains me to say, but if he does go on about interacting with you in his dreams, I'm afraid no one will believe him."

That is...not the answer Will expected. Practical, and entirely unconcerned.

Hannibal closes the small gap between them with a pointed kiss.

"You should go home, Will," Hannibal breathes against his mouth.

Will makes a small, almost desperate sound, surprised and unprepared for the moment of comfort and intimacy. It takes all his trembling reserves of willpower not to chase Hannibal's lips as he pulls back. This is not the place, not the time, and he is *tired*. Still, it's a near thing.

Instead of kissing Hannibal again, he breathes deeply. Touches Hannibal's unoccupied hand with a lingering stroke along his palm.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I'll go home. Did you leave anything at my place?"

"No," Hannibal answers. "But perhaps next time I will."

Will smiles, startled. It is brief and blinding.

"I wouldn't mind," he admits. Then he quirks a brow, leans back. "Crawford knows," he says, and it's only a question of if Hannibal is aware of that fact, too.

Hannibal gives Will a half-smile in return. "And he, like you, was very concerned with my objectivity, despite the hand he had in all of this. I've never quite been on the receiving end of his scrutiny before and don't hope to be again. I see exactly how he's gotten to be in his position."

"You got a lecture?" Will winces. He'd known he was putting Hannibal in the line of fire when he'd asked him to delay Crawford, but that doesn't quiet the guilt.

"Hardly a lecture," Hannibal says. "It was a conversation. Though I can't say that won't prevent him from giving *you* a lecture at a later date."

"Come by tomorrow. I'll make it up to you," he promises, and his gaze drops to Hannibal's lips. He still resists the urge for another kiss. "Assuming Gideon doesn't immediately come running, that is."

"I greatly look forward to tomorrow, then."

Will smiles, and then before he can fight it again, he gives in. He closes the narrow space between them and kisses Hannibal, and slides one fingertip beneath his collar and cravat, until his Mark shivers in connected pleasure.

Then he pulls away. He leaves Hannibal with one lingering backward glance and then heads out to find Crawford and confirm he can go.

oOo

Back home an hour later, Will goes upstairs without looking at whatever mess is left in the kitchen. He'll tidy up in the morning, but Will can't afford to think of that room or anything that happened there any more tonight, or else his haphazard plan may not work. For the same reason, he doesn't check on the bites again, and dons a long nightshirt so he can't see them by accident. He finds it harder not to think of Hannibal's wrists, because it's ostensibly relevant; but even as he pictures the neat rows of stitches, he also remembers Hannibal's mouth on him.

So instead he thinks of how he met Gideon. The first murdered nurse, another almost-Ripper killing. He remembers the swaggering confidence he'd slipped into, a mask concealing the inner turmoil. And he relives the lobotomy and vivisection of the secretary, until his heart is racing and his hands are itching for the scalpel.

He shouldn't do this. He never does this intentionally away from a scene. The boundaries he enforces on himself are necessary. When his brain can't leave these images alone, they transform into night terrors. Not this—reveling. It isn't even that Gideon's brand of cruelty feels good (it doesn't, it fits like a shoddy glove), but the more he can see himself killing and enjoying it, the more he feels like he's slipping into something—else.

But he does it. He immerses himself and thinks of Gideon's question until, at last, he falls asleep.

His Mark burns beneath his nightclothes.

Abel Gideon settles into a comfortable bed for the first time in two long years.

Goose down mattress, likely, and a magnificent carved wooden frame. Paul Carruthers, formerly esteemed psychologist of Roesarde City Hospital, would own nothing less. Abel, also formerly of that same hospital, used to have a bed like that before The Dinner. It's hard to remember what *he* was like before The Dinner, though, because soon after The Dinner came Frederick Chilton.

He used to be a surgeon. A good one. He still is a murderer. A decent one, too, if anyone ever saw fit to ask him. These kinds of things, that rely a great deal on manual dexterity and physical memory, one doesn't tend to forget.

A name, however? An *identity*? Much easier to slip through the fingers. So now, he is the Ripper and always was. Or perhaps now he is Abel Gideon and always was. Whoever that is.

Yes, right, the bed. The bed in the house that used to be his had no personality to bend or break or mold like clay, so it's an easy thing for his memory to hang its hat on. He used to have an office in his home as well, much like the one Paul Carruthers is sitting in, tongue pulled out over cricoid cartilage and blood slowly draining out of him from the bore holes Abel had worked neatly into each ulnar artery.

He always did like things that matched (or is that the Ripper?).

At least he put down buckets this time. He didn't quite think of that in time for the wife.

Carruthers' wife, not *his* wife. *His* wife is probably buried in a family plot somewhere, though she hardly deserves the spot. Carruthers' wife is still in her fashionably-decorated entryway, wearing her insides out and the same shocked expression as when she opened the door to find Abel on the steps. Warranted, all in all. He hadn't seen her or her husband since before The Dinner, when they all used to lunch together on alternating Sundays between hospital shifts.

Paul wasn't a surgeon, but he thought he could pick Abel's brain apart. Frederick had thought that was dreadfully funny, reading a former colleague's assessment of his mental state aloud through the bars on his room's little window over his grey morning porridge.

Pathological narcissism, the assessment had said. Abel remembers that. The word *psychotic* might have made it in there, too.

But all's well that ends well and Abel drifts off to sleep cocooned in soft silk sheets.

When he opens his eyes again, he finds himself standing in an unfamiliar room.

Everything is wrong. Inside out. Like Mrs. Carruthers' guts. There's a stove in the middle of the floor, pipe connected to nothing, and a bed in the corner with a kitchen prep table rolled up to its side. Pots and pans hang over the fireplace, burnished copper in the dancing flames. A clawfoot bathtub sits at the foot of the hearth. When he looks down, there's a fish hook wedged in the meat of his palm, frilled with soft speckled feathers and a hooked tooth. Too large and sharp to belong to a human. A canine's canine, more than likely.

When Abel looks back up, he's not alone. There's a shirtless man, or what looks like a man, in front of him and covered in blood.

That should be worrisome. It isn't, particularly. But this bloody, shirtless man doesn't exactly make the room *better* either. And his skin is as black and smooth as a pool of ink. Not normal, by any definition.

"Hello, Dr. Gideon," the man says. His voice is distorted, rasping, buzzing. Like a cloud of summer midges, thick and dark on the banks of a river. It sounds awfully familiar.

Abel squints at him and tries to work the fish hook free. It doesn't budge.

"Psychologists have this theory, that our brains focus on the details of faces more than any other object. Dare I say, I've seen yours before," he says, ducking his head to get a different angle of the man. "But I don't quite recognize you. Surgeons have this technique, you know, grafting thin layers of skin from one body to another. Sometimes the skin agrees with the man, sometimes it withers and dies."

The man prowls forward, unafraid. Curious, even.

Abel straightens. "I think yours hasn't decided if it agrees with you or not."

"And have you looked in a mirror lately?" the man asks.

At each brush of Abel's fingers, the hook worms deeper into his skin. Any deeper and he'll need to open the hand, unhook the silver curve from delicate spider-webbed nerves and the intricate cradle of palmar tendons. It doesn't feel like much, though it probably should.

Certainly unusual. Likely impossible.

"Haven't been able to find the time," Abel answers simply.

Yes, there really is something about the man and his voice that becomes more familiar now that he's closer. Almost like looking in a mirror. It is Abel, or someone who could be Abel, as much a stranger to him as he is to himself.

"Wearing someone else's skin doesn't always work. I should know," he tells the man-who-could-be-Abel. He can see it now, the places where the tar-black clings to the man's skin like a film, not yet worked down to the dermis. "The body recognizes it as foreign, kills it."

There's something foreign here. A graft on this place. The room around him shudders.

"You should know," the man agrees. "You tried to wear the Ripper's skin. It didn't fit. Still doesn't, does it?"

Abel sends a look around the room. He tries not to pick at his palm again, but it is irritating, so he scrapes his hand against the side of his leg. Every push shoves the hook deeper in.

He says, "I spent so much time believing I was him. It's harder to remember who I am when I'm not him."

There's a metaphor to be had there. Abel wrinkles his nose at the mismatched furnishings. This whole room is a metaphor, a house scrambled. His? The Ripper's? Like goose-feather beds, bathtubs and pots and fireplaces don't have any self to twist, bend and break. He doesn't recognize this furniture.

"Something else interesting about faces. The mind can't create new ones to populate our dreams with, can only pull existing ones from memory. Wonder if it works the same way with other things." Abel holds up a finger and spins it in a tight circle. "I may not know what to call what's in my head but I do recognize it. And this is not mine."

The hook digs, itches.

He pulls his palm back to consider it. "Neither is this."

The man steps forward, all darkness and blood and that damn *buzzing*, and takes Abel's wrist to get a better look at his hand and the lure dug deep inside it.

"It's one of mine," the man says.

In a burst of movement, he rips it from the meat of Abel's hand. He holds it up above them both, staring at the blood dripping from its point. Covetous. Abel wishes he could reach down Chilton's throat and rip back out what belongs to him. Watch it drip red just the same.

Oh, this is not a dream. Or, it is, but it is also something else. Is and isn't.

He knows how that feels.

Abel cradles his ruined palm and gives the man a pointed look. "*Ouch*."

The fingers holding up the bloody, dripping hook are shifting, shadowy, insubstantial and changing. Into what is unclear. He wonders if he'll stick around in this dream-that-is-also-something-else long enough to find out.

"Here to reclaim what's yours," he says slowly. Thoughtful. "I may be crazy, but I believe you're really here aren't you?"

"I'm as much here as you may have found yourself elsewhere a few days ago," the man answers.

A few days ago Abel was straight-jacketed away in a room having to listen to psychological prattle. But *mentally* ? He had found himself rather elsewhere before deciding to escape.

Suture technique was usually the last thing on his mind between rounds of electroshock therapy.

The man slips the hook through the skin of his own chest. A brand blazes to life, skewered by the fishhook. Brilliant bonfire orange. His eyes close, relishing. Abel tries not to stare directly at it. The brand. The *Mark*, if he's being accurate.

"I've been thinking about trying to get the Ripper's attention." He prods at his palm, mushes a finger in and pushes up against a tendon with his nail. Ripped through, a messy business. Staring at the Mark, it occurs to him right about then. "Or do I already have it?"

A Mark would explain some things, that's for certain.

When Frederick had pulled all the stuffing out of him and shoved something else back in, there were points that always chafed. Requisite strength and speed (not that Abel isn't strong). Brand of cruelty (not that Abel can't be cruel, but there is some element of *they deserved it* that he could never quite get behind because frankly, the end result of death itself is reason enough). Brand of crazy, so far gone that it seems to loop back around to sanity. And that's just what Abel has been able to untangle since he left the asylum.

Those points chafed but the mind has an excellent talent for eliding bits that don't make sense. Simplifying to fit a narrative. Of course, Frederick and his drugs had helped ease the way.

When the man opens his eyes again, he smiles. A savage thing. All teeth. He bows.

"Your imitation was hardly flattery, Dr. Gideon," the Ripper chides. "I'm almost insulted. You really should develop your own vision." He turns his head to the far window. There is a towering, lime-white lighthouse outside of it. "Get some perspective."

“Perspective requires clarity. Vision requires purpose,” Abel says, watching with interest as the bones underneath the skin of Ripper’s face begin to shift. “Neither of which I have in reliable supply.”

Zygomatics drift to bring the cheekbones higher, dark eyes settle back under a prominent brow, the edges of a pensive mouth pull to something self-satisfied. Maybe the psychologists are wrong about dreams and faces. Abel doesn’t recognize this one at all.

Another strike against the psychologists then. In his eyes, the whole profession already has enough strikes to sink it entirely. Frederick Chilton being responsible for the lion’s share of those, of course.

“I was hardly trying to effect flattery, you know. The effect I was hoping for was rage.” Abel follows the Ripper’s gaze to the lighthouse and its rocky shore.

“Rage? Or just an answer?” The Ripper doesn’t look at him. He only has eyes for the lighthouse. “I have proven that you are not me. Now you need to prove that *I* am not *you*.”

They are both staring at the lighthouse when the window becomes a door becomes a precipice. The Ripper reaches out and plucks the tower from the horizon. Finally, finally, he turns to look at Abel and places the lighthouse in the meaty ruin of his palm.

And then Abel jerks awake in Paul Carruthers’ feather bed, mind filled with blood and buzzing and a bleach-bone lighthouse on a cliff.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> *"It's beautiful in its own way. Giving voice to the unmentionable," Hannibal finally murmurs. "But in the short time we've known each other, Will, all I have ever seen when I look at you, when I looked inside of you, is a man striving to be his best self."*
>
> *But I dreamed of killing you, Will thinks, helpless.*
>
> --
>
> Will almost loses himself. Gideon brings a gift to the lighthouse. Hannibal helps them both.

Chapter Notes

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Hannibal spends most of the night combing the city for Abel Gideon.

It's hardly useful to check the places he himself would hide, because those are unlikely to be open to Gideon —*the flat that belongs to alienist Bedelia Du Maurier, for example; Bedelia still pays for it, for all he knows, but it has stood empty for some time.* Instead, Hannibal discreetly slips into boarding houses and brothels, the rows of rundown houses at the docks that quarter sailors for only a night or three, most of the labyrinth of tunnels in the city's west end.

He even passes by Alana Bloom's house, but reasons the cadre of officers outside her door is as good a deterrent to Dr. Gideon as it is to him, and does not linger.

Hannibal returns to his own neighborhood in the early blue of the pre-dawn, empty-handed and leadless. He manages to catch a handful of hours sleep before heading directly to the water districts to see if Will's undertaking fared better than his own.

It's still early when he arrives at Will's door. Likely far too early for Will to be awake.

He knocks all the same. And less than a minute later, Will rips the door open. There's no chance for a greeting; he tangles a hand in Hannibal's cravat and hauls him inside, kissing him fiercely before the door even fully closes behind them.

Hannibal drops his medical bag in surprise—*it doesn't sound like anything breaks but he's not hopeful.* All he can focus on is Will's tongue in his mouth, Will's fingers yanking his cravat hard enough to leave red marks on the sides of his neck. He manages to shut the door by accident as Will shoves him back against it.

Will is *taking*. Hannibal lets him. Will's certainly making good on his promise the night before.

Between deep kisses that soon turn biting and hurried, Hannibal manages, "—good morning, Will."

"No talking," Will whispers, voice rough and desperate, and lets go of the cravat long enough to start taking off Hannibal's fresh-pressed clothes. He tugs at buttons as his teeth ghost over Hannibal's jaw, his throat, bits of skin that can be seen. Hannibal's coat drops first, then waistcoat soon after.

—he is not going to have Will right here in the entryway—

Hannibal's lip curls at the idea but his mouth softens into a groan as Will crushes their bodies together. The Mark flares to life, a second heartbeat ricocheting through him. It had been a long, unsuccessful night and a perfunctory, unsatisfying rest but Will is here and driven and frantic and Hannibal is halfway hard already.

—he might—

He gets hand into Will's hair and twists, breaking their kiss. He holds tight and tugs Will's head back. Will groans, halfway to snapping his teeth.

"We'll talk after, then." Hannibal runs the point of his tongue along the shell of Will's ear before biting at the cartilage. Enough to feel. Punctuation. Will gasps and shivers under his teeth.

"After," he agrees, and hooks his fingers into a gap between buttons on Hannibal's shirt and tugs him down the hall.

Will seems determined to keep them as close together as possible as he leads. Hannibal finds himself shoved against walls several times but this was Will's promise and is Will's design and he hardly minds. He can't help the startled, slightly soft look that crosses his face when Will shoves him into a wide, worn armchair in the dining-room-turned-den. He stares as Will strips; he's hardly fully dressed, but it's still a production in and of itself. And then Will is back on him, a small jar in hand that he quickly sets aside *—but within easy reach—* in favor of crawling into his lap.

Hannibal prides himself on control, on lining pieces up to watch them knock into each other on the way down. But Will is mesmerizing in his control, in his purpose.

—in this moment, he is going to let Will take anything he wants—

He pulls Will further into his lap, scrapes nails delicately up and down shivering, bare thighs. His hands move up to Will's stomach and the gauze wrap around his bites as he works his tongue over Will's Mark until he whines. Hannibal cracks an eye open to glance at the jar; it's some kind of oil, and liable to stain. Reluctantly, he takes his hands off Will long enough to peel off his shirt. He tries to shift Will off long enough to start on his trousers too, but Will bites at his lips instead.

Hannibal bites back.

"If you're not going to move," he says between kisses, "I'm going to need some assistance. You are my first appointment of the day, and I have appearances to maintain."

Whatever is going on in the intricate machine of Will's mind, logic still manages to break through. "Be quick," Will pants, as he sets his knees onto the arms of the chair, granting Hannibal a few inches of space. He grips the back of the chair on either side of Hannibal's head and licks the bite on his ear. " *Fuck*, I need you in me."

Hannibal has to shut his eyes at that.

—Will is going to be sore—

He doesn't care. He maneuvers his trousers off the best he can with Will barely far enough away, tongue flicking at his ear.

—all of their bruises are still sensitive, purpling and prominent—

As soon as he's bare, he drags Will back on top of him, chasing friction and heat with a stuttered push of his hips. Hannibal gets another fistful of curls and sinks his teeth into the muscular hollow between Will's shoulder blade and collarbone. Will's head falls back and he cries out, loud and full.

One of his hands holds tight to Hannibal's neck, palm flush with the Mark, while the other scrabbles for the jar next to them. The top pops off, skitters to the floor and away, forgotten. The oil shines on Will's fingers, smells of paraffin and kerosene and something clean and crisp. Back arching, Marked chest presented like an offering, Will starts to work himself open with single-minded determination, hips rolling against his hand as he gasps.

Hannibal leans back as far as he can and keeps himself very still to watch. Will is so often fraught and turned inside but he is not hiding now. Hannibal's hands are careful as he slips light fingers over every part he can reach without interrupting. The maddeningly soft dip of Will's lower back, the delicate skin of his inner thighs as he moves, the line of sweat darting down his mottled neck to settle in his collarbones, the bold lines of the Mark.

Will looks down at him through dark, dark lashes, lips swollen and parted. Hannibal runs a hand over his hip and stills him, sitting up enough so that he can reach around to where Will has two fingers buried deep to grab his wrist. He guides Will's hand, fucking slowly and deliberately.

"*Hannibal*." The name punches out of Will.

Will adds a third finger; Hannibal doesn't let him lose the rhythm. Will's head lists to the side, eyes closing, skin flushed crimson.

"Keep going," Will gasps. "Please, *yes*."

Hannibal does, pressing his face against Will's chest and catching beads of sweat with his tongue, leaving constellations of biting kisses behind. He slips his hand off Will's hip and moves it between them to slide his thumb over the head of Will's leaking cock, then sucks the digit into his mouth, savoring *—he makes sure Will is watching when he does.*

He strokes Will barely, lazily, fingers loose and unhurried. He guides Will's other hand in a particularly hard thrust.

Will all but sobs.

Hannibal presses a kiss against Will's arched throat and says, "Do you want to finish like this?"

"*No*," he hisses, even as he bucks. "I need you in me, Hannibal. I need—I need you to remind me that I'm me. That we're *us*."

Us.

Hannibal stops breathing. He keeps Will from pulling his fingers out, but only until he stops fighting and lets Hannibal pull them out all at once. Will lets out a shaking moan but Hannibal is already reaching for the little jar *—the oil is just as lightweight as it looked, an odd texture, but it warms quickly between his fingers.* He holds Will's hips steady as he works to line him up.

He breathes Will's name against the Mark on his chest as if the reminder could sink deep into skin, muscle, atrium and ventricle and perfuse through his body. And gently guides Will down onto his cock. Will is hot and tight around him and it's almost the same as massaging his cardiac muscle and slipping between the folds of his brain and tugging every spinal nerve with unseen fingers. But Will can reach him, here. There is no thin line, no quicksilver filament that delineates where he stops and Will begins. Just flesh, so much permeable flesh.

Will leans forward, forehead pressing against Hannibal's. He gasps out little begging, thankful sounds until he's fully seated, hips circling and grinding.

"Yes," Will whispers, "*yes*."

And then he moves, thighs flexing and arms tensing as he grips the chair. Hannibal braces his palms on Will's hips and buries his noises of pleasure in Will's skin until Will mouths at his hairline and he looks up. Gazes up at eyes lidded and dark, at the roll of Will's shoulders and the arch of his neck as they move.

Hannibal would upend everything for this man. No, not *would;* it isn't theoretical. In so many ways he already has.

—this is giving and taking, rivers running into oceans splitting into rivers, an infinity loop of meeting Will driving downward with hips snapping up, of Will's tongue in his mouth; they are each an echo of the other, and they are both starving things, the breath held between their mouths tasting of blood and hunger and understanding—

Will sharpens his mind and self to clarity against Hannibal like a whetstone, but with each frantically speeding thrust, Hannibal is unravelling in the face of such singular beauty, clutching onto Will's light and darkness both as if he could spear them into himself, forever closer.

They hurtle into each other, unstoppable, inviolate.

Will clenches around him tight, coming with a shout. Hannibal doesn't blink, taking in every small muscle twitch and the way Will's eyes crinkle shut and the exact shape of his mouth falling open. His eyes start to water at the edges so he closes his eyes at last, keeping his rhythm as Will moves blindly with mindless, bitten-off sounds. Hannibal yanks Will's hips down with nails carving red marks, once, twice, then grinds up into him as he comes.

It takes a long time for his mind to clear, awash in their shared tide. Slowly, he eases back into the chair and takes Will, boneless and pliant, with him.

The madness in Will is sated, finally, by the heat of Hannibal's skin, and the slow gentling of their racing hearts together.

He'd woken up frantic, half unsure of where he began and the Ripper ended, and half exultant in the relief he'd felt letting himself blur so thoroughly with him in the landscape of Gideon's psyche. Nothing he'd tried to return him to something sensible had worked, not coffee or a cold shower or vigorously applied self-loathing.

But Hannibal is different. Hannibal is always different. Like this, still hot inside of him, Hannibal is the first thing all morning to feel *real*. Will can breathe again.

He tucks himself against Hannibal, making sure to sit so that they'll remain joined for as long as possible. His body aches, and every nerve ending firing is part of a symphony. He nuzzles against Hannibal's throat and leaves small kisses there. His hand that isn't streaked with the oil he uses on his fishing lures strokes Hannibal's shoulder. Down farther, to the bandages over his wrist, which he touches with reverent care.

Hannibal accepts it all, and his own hands wander, skimming down the nocks of Will's spine all the way to where his cock is buried inside him. His lips ghost, feather soft, over Will's forehead. "Let me know when you're ready to talk."

Will's hips tilt just a little more, encouraging. It feels good. He doesn't want to stop feeling good.

"Was I really your first appointment of the day?" he murmurs.

He hadn't given it much thought in the moment, but it comes back to him now. If it's true, why? Because Hannibal wanted to have an update? Or because he wanted his repayment for enduring Crawford's lecture?

Hannibal's fingers press slightly rougher against Will's rim, even as he smooths his other hand up and down Will's side.

"I wanted to see you," he answers, then drops another kiss into Will's curls. Will listens to him inhale, a slow and deep thing. "I figured if I came early enough, I may yet beat Jack Crawford to your door."

He huffs a small laugh. "Before I opened the door, I didn't know which of you would be there. I didn't know which I wanted more: you, or a development on the case I could lose myself in." Everything from last night on is a maelstrom, one that is finally calming, laying clear the damage. He sneaks a sly glance at Hannibal. "I'm glad it was you. The way I felt, I might have taken a swing at Crawford."

"I'd prefer you lose yourself in me rather than a case. Jack and I differ substantially on standard of care."

Will considers holding back the details of his night for just another minute longer, but it's easier, now, to think back on it. He is warm and held and claimed, and he is no longer frantic. Hannibal's fingers stroke absently over the bandages around his middle.

"Last night — it worked. I made contact with Gideon. I've sent him to the lighthouse where the Ouse meets the bay. Where the Ripper left Miriam Lass's arm for Crawford to find."

"Out of the way, where he can do the least harm," Hannibal says. The tip of his finger catches in the bandages. "Animals who are hunted often innately recognize threats, even when faced with unfamiliar predators. Abel Gideon is a hunted predator. This is a trap and he will see it."

"Maybe. But he's desperate. He'll go. I made sure of that."

Boiled down to the outcome, it doesn't seem distressing at all. But from the very start, the dream had been wrong. It had begun with him soaked in Hannibal's blood, unsure of if he'd saved or killed him. Even now, he feels the siren call of slipping into the Ripper's skin once more, remembers the pierce of the hook through his chest.

That dream…that dream had not gone the way he'd intended it to.

He trembles in Hannibal's arms.

Hannibal slips an arm around his waist, secure. "Will?"

Will presses his face into Hannibal's shoulder, eyes closed, surrounded by the scent of him. "It was...an odd dream. I only had so much control of it. But I — I wore the Ripper's skin to talk to him. Out of cowardice and some hope that he'd care more what the Ripper had to say than what I did. I lost myself, or came close to it."

His shivering intensifies. He takes a shuddering breath.

“It felt so good,” he confesses, barely a whisper.

Hannibal’s fingers still. Will winces, expecting concern. Horror.

“Being intimate with our instincts often feels good, no matter how dark and unacceptable they seem,” Hannibal says at last. His voice is gentle but even. Undisturbed. “You have collected echoes of the Ripper and something inside you is exploring them. It’s as much a part of you as anything else, not something to be frightened of.” He resumes his careful touches, more purposeful now. “You are not him, Will. You won’t ever be. No matter how much of yourself you leave behind in his skin.

“I know,” Will says. He nuzzles against Hannibal’s pulse, then down further, against the Mark. “But do you remember what I told you, that first day? That I’ve always known there will come a time when it’s my hand holding the knife?”

This is the hard part. The terrifying part. The part that had made him frantic when he woke.

It was the core of him that delighted in inhabiting Gideon’s cruelty, the core of him that felt pleasure at the Ripper finally settling on him like a mantle.

“I don’t think I’d stop,” he whispers. “I don’t think I would cut it off. It’s not an extremity gone rogue, it’s something deeper. Something that doesn’t need to reflect in order to exist.”

And Hannibal has nothing to say to that.

Will can *feel* the way his breathing hitches. But this time, Will doesn’t flinch. The fight has gone out of him. He could sleep like this. Sleep, and surrender all responsibility for what he is.

“It's beautiful in its own way. Giving voice to the unmentionable,” Hannibal finally murmurs. “But in the short time we’ve known each other, Will, all I have ever seen when I look at you, when I looked *inside* of you, is a man striving to be his best self.”

But I dreamed of killing you, Will thinks, helpless.

“You’re supposed to be concerned,” he says, and a tired, hysterical laugh slips out of him. “But of course you aren’t.”

“Would my concerns be useful? Or would they only support your self-flagellation?”

Will shakes his head, gripping at Hannibal’s arm. “You can’t just accept everything I present to you. That’s dangerous, Hannibal.”

“Of course it’s dangerous,” Hannibal says as Will breathes against his Mark. “Leaps of faith often are. But I trust that you will always come back to yourself. And to me.”

“I’ve never known myself as well as I know myself when I’m with you,” Will confesses. *And what I know scares me*. The freest version of himself still craves darkness. Biting and blood and shocking possessiveness. The only salvation Will has is that he doesn’t crave violence in the same way as so many of the murderers he’s hunted. It’s not a compulsion towards

domination and ownership. If anything, it's a compulsion towards understanding. A comprehension so absolute that of course he chases after it every time, even as it destroys his mind.

But Hannibal has been right beside him this whole time. Has touched his mind, felt through his skin. He has both an intimacy and a perspective that Will lacks. If Hannibal says he trusts Will, then he sees something Will doesn't. And Will, in turn, must trust that he's right.

He pulls his head back at last, looking down into Hannibal's face.

"None of this is the Mark, is it?" he murmurs. "None of these revelations. The situations it guides me into have hastened it, but it's not causing any of this."

It's just me.

It's just us.

"I told you as much the day we met," Hannibal agrees, splaying a hand over Will's Mark. "The stag you dreamed, the one that gave you this, didn't plant something in you to fester. It made room for something that was already inside you. That is what the Marks do. They are resonators, amplifiers. When presented with power, it is as natural to choose destruction as it is to choose compassion."

Hannibal slides both hands up and over Will's chest, collarbones, neck, to pull him back to a tender kiss.

Will almost resists, almost asks *And what did yours amplify?* but gives in, instead.

He knows there's something hidden there, just below the surface. The way Hannibal has never shied away, the way the Unnamed had led him into slitting his own wrists—there is something in Hannibal, in that inexplicable hunger he has, among those antlers and the blood, and Will thinks he can almost see it.

He wants to see it.

"How much longer can you stay?" he asks against Hannibal's lips.

"Long enough for coffee," Hannibal says. With a glance towards the clothes crumpled on the floor beside the chair, he adds, "And to borrow your iron."

Will grins, and the moment breaks. The mundane rushes back in, and he lets it, because it comes with its own relief.

Abel's trip to the lighthouse, to put it mildly, is a right bitch.

It's no small thing, making inquiries. Someone's put up wanted posters of his face and passed around sketches. He stands in front of one for a long while, squinting. The nose is far too long, the lips too narrow, the chin sharp enough to get impaled on. An *excellent* job, through and through.

When Abel walks away from the poster, no one gives him a second glance.

People *do* look at him like he's lost his mind when he asks around about a white lighthouse. In his defense, he's only seen it once in a dream with more interesting things to look at, and in drawings, renderings of Ripper crimes that Frederick showed him in an effort to *jog his memory*. Apparently they found most of an arm there, holding a letter and a pocket watch inscribed with the name *Miriam Lass.* That was how they knew he wasn't the Ripper.

Now that damn lighthouse is showing up in his dreams.

Memory successfully jogged, Dr. Chilton.

When he finally does get directions, he takes a carriage to the next little village over. Just outside it is the rise of a cliff and a clear view of the sloping path to the lighthouse. In a moment of inspiration, he kills the carriage driver. It's a crime of passion, so to speak. And has the unintended side effect of leaving Abel alone with the horses. He never did like horses.

Abel listens to the thud of the waves against the stone as he drags the body and his bag from the carriage and gets to work. Every so often, he stares up the wide expanse of sky that seems to spool out into eternity. He feels like that. Blank, blue, endless.

The sea air helps with vision and perspective. Or so the artists say, anyway, the ones with enough money to lark off to the seaside for the winter months. Dr. Carruthers' second best suit is irreparably stained by the time he sits back to admire his work.

The driver's belly is a wet red cradle of wanted drawings Abel pulled down along his winding route through the city with Paul Carruthers' hands nestled in the soaking paper. He's pulled the offal into one of Mrs. Carruthers' picnic baskets, laid in damp towels.

A host gift. It's only polite.

Abel watches the lighthouse. No one goes in. No one goes out. He's not certain how much time has passed but a man can only wait so long. He throws everything into the carriage cab, including the driver, and changes into the fresh clothes he stole from Dr. Carruthers' wardrobe. He slips the picnic basket onto his arm and leaves everything else behind.

Inside the lighthouse, the nautilus spiral of steps is eerily silent, but he doesn't think it's empty. Abel isn't used to being one of several killers in the room. Bit of an inevitable, stomach-sinking feeling, really. The door at the top of the steps is already ajar.

"Knock, knock," he sing-songs as he swings it open. "Anybody home?"

The lighthouse keeper doesn't answer. Someone is painstakingly peeling his face back from his skull. Someone lean and tall, with scalpel-edge cheekbones, shadowed eyes, a pensive mouth. A man and not a man. It occurs to Abel that *this* is what a killer looks like.

It's remarkably like his dream. *Too* like his dream.

Abel stops short and blinks. He's certainly awake. And maybe more crazy than he once thought.

Or then again, he thinks, eyes finding the bright Mark in the hollow of the stranger's bared collarbones, *perhaps not*.

"The Ripper, I presume," he says and sets the picnic basket between them. He flicks open the lid and tilts it towards him. "It's amazing how many organs the body can offer up before it really starts to suffer."

The Ripper's eyes drop to the basket. "For a man who claimed to be someone else, I didn't expect much in the way of courtesy, Dr. Gideon."

Such a perfectly normal voice, but an accent he doesn't recognize. Nothing like the voice from his dream. Strange, but who is he to judge how heretical sorcery works.

Abel's attention drops back to the lighthouse keeper. His face is a perfectly lab-worthy specimen, muscles and soft tissues utterly untouched despite the flaying. A number of strange instruments are inserted through the body, pinning it to the floor — various knives, an axe, a sword, a spear right through the chest, arrows, a rather impressive assortment of needles.

"I admit I was confused on that but please don't patronize me," Abel says. "It was like remembering something from your childhood and wondering if it really happened to you or if it happened to someone else. And then sadly realizing it was just some picture you saw in a book."

The Ripper's head cocks to one side. "You know you're not me but you don't know much more about who you are beyond that."

"I'm finding *me* again," he says, nudging the basket with his toe. "One piece at a time. I plan to take back several pieces out of my doctor. When he's not cowering in his house, surrounded by lawmen."

The edges of the Ripper's lips curl up in a little, knowing smile. Unsettling; no living man should look like that. Abel shifts, holding his ground but watching the Ripper stride towards him. He blinks but the image does not fade or shift. Perhaps Carruthers was right and he is psychotic after all.

"If you wish to know who you are, Dr. Gideon, you do not need me. You need a mirror," the Ripper says. "I assume you had more visitors than just a doctor."

Abel tongues at his cheek a moment and then answers, "Yes. I was something of a curiosity. Put me in a cabinet and gawk. Everybody wanted a piece. Doctors, alienists, a surgeon who wanted to crack my skull and remove parts of my brain for study. And then there was *Will Graham*. Not a physician, might be a little mad himself, if we're being honest."

The Ripper waits and ignores the basket entirely.

"My doctor walled me in with your crimes, brick by brick, until that's all I could see. Perhaps he hoped I would suffocate, choke on the sheer glut of *my* many crimes. What it did was build me a new reality; there was nothing beyond the walls of my prison." He sucks his teeth

and goes on. “Will Graham was a hammer. He knocked a brick loose and that’s when I remembered four walls do not a world make.”

The Ripper doesn't smile and in fact looks downright unaffected. But his sharp eyes glow, catch the light from the Mark on his chest.

He says, “I can tell you where to find him.”

There’s a slight hitch in Will’s plan to tell Crawford about the lighthouse: Abel Gideon has left them new bodies. Paul Carruthers — another doctor who poked and prodded at his mind — and his blameless wife. It delays Will more than an hour, staring into the cleaning buckets filled with blood, edging around the mess in the foyer.

Katz finds signs that the bedroom has been inhabited recently. There’s still an impression in the goose down mattress. It jars Will out of Gideon’s headspace, long enough to tell Crawford where to send his men.

(It’s easy to explain while avoiding all mention of the dream; that’s why he picked it. Gideon will go to the lighthouse because it’s where the Ripper proved he was not stuck in Chilton’s asylum. The location has become a mirror, a testing ground for identity.)

But when Will tries to follow Crawford into his carriage, Crawford stops him. “Go home, Will,” he says.

“I should be there.”

“No. You look worse than you did last night.” He glowers like he can see the morning’s blackness still clinging to Will. “You need to be in *bed*.”

“So *now* you care about the bedrest order?”

“I think that a man as dead on his feet as you are has no business holding a weapon. This arrest is going to be dangerous.”

Will winces. He can see it, his hand on the knife, shaking, his temper hair-trigger.

Hannibal’s blood coating his skin.

He forces the thought away, but the strain must show on his face.

“Bed,” Crawford demands. “Now. I’ll send you an update when we have him in custody again.” He looks Will up and down, gaze skittering off the fresh marks peeking above Will’s collar once more, then adds, “Good work, today. You’ve earned the rest.”

Will doesn’t dignify that awkward attempt at coddling with a response, doesn’t argue. He goes to hire another carriage home.

His head begins to ache five minutes into the ride. As soon as he’s back at the house, the front door closed and his hat and coat off, he retreats to the kitchen and puts on the kettle.

Hannibal's tea isn't Hannibal, but it's something. It'll fix his head at least.

(Now there's a thought.)

Will sinks into the chair with a groan and covers his face with his hands. Was one day of certainty too much to ask for? It had felt so good that morning, all of it, not just the fucking, but the acceptance, the safety of Hannibal holding him. If he hadn't gone to Crawford, if he'd sent a letter, maybe —*maybe*—

The kettle whistles. He drags himself over to the hob to turn it off, pours water into the teapot. The bitter scent of willow bark fills the room. He lets it steep for all of a minute before he pours himself a cup. It's too hot to drink. He sips it anyway, staring at the table. Remembering Hannibal tonguing open the bites on his belly. Remembering how Hannibal had fallen upon him after seeing Will work.

Because of it.

Or — no. Maybe not just that. Will takes another step back, and hears himself rhapsodizing about the Ripper's murders. About what, precisely, he did with the bodies. Swapping recipes with Hannibal, talking about *hunger* …

The Ripper's hunger. Hannibal's hunger, in the dream.

Why did you eat me ?

There's something there, that jagged, broken part of Hannibal. He can almost see it. He's so close. So close, and —

The clearing of an unfamiliar throat breaks his train of thought, and his head jerks up.

Abel Gideon smiles at him from the kitchen doorway. The cup falls from Will's hand, shatters as it hits the floor.

"You're looking a little peaky, Mr. Graham, if I'm allowed to say so," Abel Gideon drawls. He's dusted with what looks like coal, a knife almost casually in hand. "Who *is* your doctor?"

You were supposed to go to the lighthouse. Will's mind spins out across options. Did he go, and avoid capture? Did he manage to incapacitate whoever Crawford sent? Was the warning too late?

Was Gideon always going to come here, instead? The dream. He must have slipped up in the dream.

His lips twitch toward a snarl, but he has to stay calm. De-escalate. His Mark throbs as if frustrated, wanting to unfurl, wanting a knife in his hand.

He resists.

"Dr. Gideon, you've been busy," Will says instead, and hopes his voice is steady.

Hopes it doesn't sound like it had when he wore the Ripper's skin.

Gideon taps the point of the knife against his temple and nods. "That is the recommendation after getting out of prison, which, make no mistake, that place is a prison. Keep busy. Find work. Don't get into more trouble."

He frowns at Will. "Surprisingly difficult, that last one. I don't know if I'll ever feel like myself again. I don't know if there's a self left to feel like. I spent so much time believing I was him it got harder to remember who I was when I wasn't him."

Will feels his gaze, up and down and then back onto his face. Recognition blooms. They've seen each other before, though; Gideon knew his name, knew to come here. So then what…?

Abel clicks his tongue. "But *you*, Mr. Graham, *you* are not him. How *did* I get in your dream, then?"

Fuck.

Will has two options. One, deny all knowledge, and side with every person who has manipulated and twisted Gideon until he's reached this point.

Two, admit to heresy. Maybe Hannibal is right, and nobody will believe Abel Gideon, but the risk is too great. Gideon already has a knife; Will doesn't need to hand him a noose as well.

But no, there's a third option. He played the Ripper last night. Why does Gideon no longer believe that's who Will is?

The Mark hums, and behind Gideon, in the hall, an ink-dark copy of Will appears. Will remembers how he'd felt in that dream. Feels the Ripper's confidence, his curiosity. He can't duplicate the Ripper, but maybe he can shape something by command alone. If he can just get the visuals right, it might fool Gideon. Intimidate him long enough for Will to get the upper hand.

The Unnamed took the shape of a stag in his dreams. He reaches for it. The Ripper echoes inside of him.

Think of me.

The hunger.

I know you.

Familiar, so familiar, and as Will watches, antlers grow from the crown of his double's head. The copy returns Will's gaze levelly, but unlike the other day, this one is not hollow, or blank. Instead, it bows its head in greeting. Present.

It's not supposed to be like that.

"Am I not him?" says Will to Gideon, even as the echo of the Ripper says it to Will.

Gideon chances a glance over his shoulder and then side-steps out of the path of both Graham and the double. “I’m afraid not.” He holds his knife up horizontal a ways above his own head. “Bit taller. But that’s a marvelous likeness. Except for your face, of course.”

Will falters, for just a moment, gaze darting back to the Ripper’s shadow. Gideon knows that shape from his dream. How can he recognize the flesh, the antlers, and yet say it’s wrong?

“Having met the both of you, I wouldn’t have picked you for pack hunters. *He* seems more like a singular species and you don’t seem overly social,” Gideon says, then pauses. Considering? Will can’t breathe. “Whose idea was the lighthouse, I wonder. You know, I was watching the entrance and I never even saw him go inside.”

The antlered double winks.

Will breaks.

His double remains his double, not the Ripper himself come to mock Will, but it is not just a copy Will has manipulated for show. It’s built on knowledge, *real* knowledge he had been teetering on the edge of and that is now entirely undeniable.

The Mark was never what was stopping him from doubling the Ripper. It was just a failure in understanding.

But now he knows exactly who could anticipate Gideon going to the lighthouse. And he knows who, in his darkest dreams, grows antlers and devours with an endless hunger.

He knows who else bears a Mark and has a recipe on hand for liver.

A laugh slips out of Will, helpless and angry and hurt and exultant. Hannibal is the Ripper, is the only person to ever understand him with any tenderness. The Ripper had drunk up Will’s adoration for the artistry of his crimes, had spread Will out on the table and consumed him for it.

Will has never known himself as well as he knows himself in Hannibal’s arms.

And it felt so good.

The double is still watching him, only him — and then it smiles, with sharp teeth, and lunges for Gideon.

“No!” Will shouts, but he can’t dissolve it, can’t get between it and Gideon, can only reach out and slide into it, and then it’s Will shoving Gideon down to the floor, ravenous.

Gideon goes down easy. But he still has the knife, and the blade is tilted up now. Will reaches for it, and Gideon jerks his head back.

Will knows how Gideon fights. The physicality of it, the tenor of his reactions. He’s almost able to get out of the way.

Except his brain is too split, too on fire, torn between indiscriminate rage, desperate hunger, exaltation that the day has come, that he's finally holding the knife, and cold certainty that he can't let himself have any of it. He needs to subdue Gideon, bring him in. That was the whole point. He wanted to *help* Gideon.

He hesitates, and the back of Gideon's skull smashes into his nose, and Will yells in pain. Snarling, blood streaming down his throat and face, he grabs for Gideon's blade.

Across the room, where Will once stood, the double he switched places with now watches with burning, implacable eyes. It takes up one of the kitchen knives, but does not move to help.

Gideon's hand tightens on the handle of his own weapon.

"*Ah-ah*," he chides, voice barely strangled. "Taking things that don't belong to us is what got us both into this mess."

He kicks a leg out and crosses it over, trapping Will's knee. He locks his ankle around his other leg and throws all his weight to one side. Will is rolled onto his back, and he can stop this, he knows he can. He's stronger, faster, he can just swap places with his double again—

But he doesn't break free. The pain from his busted nose is blinding. His mind refuses to cooperate. Gideon's voice asking *Who am I* rings through his skull over and over. There's a moment, brief but *enough*, if only he could focus, where Gideon lets up enough to turn and rest his weight on Will's legs. He doesn't take it.

His double twirls the knife it holds but still doesn't move to help. It watches them both expectantly as Gideon stares down at Will.

The man is desperate. He wants answers, more than anything. Will forces himself to *think*.

"You want to know who you are, Abel Gideon? You're a man who doesn't have a center," Will slurs, voice thick with blood. "You're all desperate impulse and nothing else, and *you* did it to yourself. Whatever lived at the core of you, you didn't care about, so it dissolved into an aching void before you ever entered Chilton's asylum."

Gideon harrumphs, disappointed as if they're debating over tea, and shoves his arm hard against Will's chest, the impact bouncing Will's head into the ground again.

"Words can be so hurtful, Mr. Graham," he says, leaning in.

The knife bites into the thin skin of Will's forehead, drags in a blinding line down to his cheek. Gideon grins, the tip of the blade digging in, soft flesh giving and unleashing a wave of scalding blood down Will's jaw. Will pants through it, refusing to scream, refusing to flinch.

"If I kill you...like he would kill you…" Gideon says, tilting his head. "I wonder if I could understand him better."

Will face splits into a grin, bright and manic.

“You don’t want to understand him,” he warns, softly. “Look what it did to me.”

And then he lunges up, uncaring of the blade, and bites Gideon’s lips from his face.

In another instant, he has taken the place of his double again, and he can still feel the weight of antlers on his brow, even as he falls on Gideon with the kitchen knife. It is glorious, as the shell he left behind turns black and seizes Gideon with inhuman strength, hauling him upright, taking his wrists, holding his arms out. Will’s knife catches first one wrist, then the next, and he cuts deep, an unraveling. Gideon howls and fights and it means nothing, because Will is stronger, and Will is ecstatic, and Will is full of a burning rage.

The double dissolves into smoke and Will slams Gideon’s head into the floor until he stops moving.

And then the world is quiet.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> *He is in the middle of hanging his coat in the entryway when it catches his attention. All of the gaslights are still turned off, all except for the open doorway into the dining room, which glows with low light, warm and inviting—he doesn't make a habit of leaving lights on. Hannibal goes still and listens. The house makes only small settling noises around him.*
>
> *Then he smells it. Blood, nearly indistinguishable from that of the offal in his basket. And underneath it, there's notes of amber, musk, and a light scent, clean and floral.*
>
> --
>
> A confrontation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal takes Gideon's picnic basket back with him.

He tucks it neatly out of sight at each stop of his afternoon rounds, lid tightly shut. The acrid smell of drying blood is apparent to his nose all day *—but if his patients notice anything out of the ordinary, they say nothing.* His post box is empty, no letters from Will or summons from Jack Crawford, so he returns home to await news.

He knows *—no, he hopes—* that facing the brutal, exacting intent of Abel Gideon will allow Will to come into his own *—Will's confession from the morning still plays in his mind, more music than words*. News will likely come straight from Will himself: begging, perhaps, a desperate plea for Hannibal to risk his career and life to help him.

In a scenario where Gideon manages to take his piece of Will, Hannibal expects to hear from Jack *—this one he very carefully doesn't think about; it is a possibility, unavoidable, but he doesn't want to waste the time imagining it.*

He is in the middle of hanging his coat in the entryway when it catches his attention. All of the gaslights are still turned off, all except for the open doorway into the dining room, which glows with low light, warm and inviting *—he doesn't make a habit of leaving lights on*. Hannibal goes still and listens. The house makes only small settling noises around him.

Then he smells it. Blood, nearly indistinguishable from that of the offal in his basket. And underneath it, there's notes of amber, musk, and a light scent, clean and floral.

White clover.

He leaves the basket and his bag by the door, slips the scalpel from his pocket, and heads down the hall.

When Hannibal crosses into the dining room, he finds Abel Gideon sprawled out on the table, naked and dead with limbs loosely splayed and wrists slashed in neat, vertical lines. His face is a hellish jumble of pummeled bone, a prison of teeth and gums protruding wholesale from the barest remnant of lips. Hannibal can't properly see his eyes, yanked out and shoved backwards into the sockets. The optic nerves drape down his broken cheeks like a solid line of whitish-pink tears. A familiar lure pierces the skin at the base of Gideon's throat, feathered and sharp: the same one Hannibal had inspected that first day in Will's house *—he can almost feel the prick of the hook against his thumb*.

And across Gideon's stomach lie five bite marks, ragged and raw. Sprays of white clover bloom from each and every one.

Think of me, Will's voice whispers in his head.

Hannibal is a hollow, a blank space, a hole in the ground.

His chest squeezes, burns with something he doesn't know the name for *—fierce pride and pleasure or crushing loss or the feeling of finally, finally coming home.* He unfastens his shirt cuffs and folds the fabric up and out of the way, only to hesitate as he reaches for the offering. Will and his newfound understanding may be long gone, but Hannibal turns his back on Gideon, speaking into the dark.

"Did you want to surprise me, Will?"

At first, there is no answer. No sign that he is anything but alone. Hannibal listens closely for any movement, for breathing other than his own *—he knows all the places in the house the floorboards creak; Will doesn't.* It doesn't take him long to catch the sound of quiet footsteps and the light groan of the kitchen floorboards.

Will melts from the shadows into the warm light of the dining room. He's clean, no blood spotting his clothes, and his shirt is undone low enough that Hannibal can see the edge of his Mark. His nose is swollen, tinged pink and purple, and a deep, clotting cut runs from his temple down to the curve of his cheek.

He's holding a knife and looking past Hannibal's shoulder, at Gideon's body. In a rush of selfish irritation, Hannibal wants Will to look at him.

"Did it work?" Will asks. His voice is even, lightly curious. "Did you expect to find me in his place?"

Hannibal wants to close the distance between them. The air feels heavy, charged with the danger that he can read clearly in the lines of Wil's body. He doesn't move.

“I knew you would be victorious,” he answers and it’s true, yet for all his Mark-given abilities, he is not psychic. He never expected a display, let alone one so pointed. “But with all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you.”

Will's face twitches into a snarl as his eyes snap to Hannibal at last. "What would you have done? If you'd been wrong?"

“Dr. Gideon wouldn’t have made it far,” he answers. “I would’ve kept him alive. Peeled the skin off his hands, for touching you. Cooked him, one piece at a time. He would’ve joined me at the table for as long as he was able to sit upright and hold his utensils.”

Will’s eyes widen and he starts to shake; even his grip on the knife trembles. It takes everything Hannibal has not to reach for him, not to favor Will’s cheek and neck and downy curls with soft touches like they belong to him. That trembling, the way it threatens to rip Will apart with anger or fear or grief makes a small part of him shake in answer —*only his doesn’t show; it never does.*

In time with the throbbing of the Mark, Will hears — thinks —*mine, mine, mine*.

"The day finally came," he says, "and it felt so *good*, Hannibal."

Every second of it. Hannibal had given him a gift. The satisfaction of executing his design upon Gideon's flesh is still dancing just below his skin, and a part of Will wants to go to Hannibal, fall to his knees, cling close and shut his eyes and be praised and accepted and adored. He has been very careful, these last few hours, to stay focused only on what is in front of him. He's only let himself feel the deep reverberations of Hannibal's betrayal, hasn't even looked closely enough at it to know if he's more angry that he never saw that Hannibal was the Ripper, that Hannibal sent Gideon after him for unknown reasons, or that all the connection, the *affection*, might have been a lie.

(He almost wants it to have been a lie. That would make what has to come next easier.)

The possibility that he can shed his anger and wrap himself up in Hannibal’s arms instead is seductive.

But Will has obligations. Now, more than ever. Tomorrow morning, he's going to hand himself over to the Inquisitors. And before that, he will give the city the Ripper's death, because nobody else will ever be able to.

Because Will won't let anybody else have him.

“That is all I’ve ever wanted for you,” Hannibal says. His grip shifts on the scalpel. His forearm flexes, tightly-corded, and —

And there are no bandages there. No wound. Not even the faint pink of a scar. *Another deception* ? Impossible. Will had staunched the blood himself, had watched Hannibal stitch his arms back up. He wants to ask, to beg one last answer.

But the time for hesitation, for fascination, is gone.

Shadows pull together behind Hannibal, swift and sure and practiced now, close enough to touch. Just as Will lunges, his double seizes Hannibal with all the righteous, bruising strength of Jack Crawford.

Hannibal claws at the arm crushing his windpipe, and swings the scalpel back through the air. It meets not inky false flesh, but Will's side.

(Hannibal was always going to strike, always going to use the Mark to scatter any doubles before facing down Will, and so the moment he moved, Will was already behind him.)

Will screams as the scalpel bottoms out between his ribs, and in animal reflex, he sinks his teeth into the nape of Hannibal's neck. The slash on his cheek and temple split open; blood runs hot down his face, catches damp in his eyelashes.

The double he left behind collides with Hannibal, its knife piercing into his belly.

Hannibal curls against the force of the blade with a noise somewhere between a growl and a shout. The double twists the knife, rips it up and up. Hannibal’s stomach heaves in a slick, wet rush, and Will can hear it, can all but *taste* it.

Then Hannibal’s wrist flicks, and the scalpel tears up and out Will’s side.

Pain sets his ribs on fire, searing as he tries to hold onto Hannibal. Will bites harder, even as Hannibal’s flesh and his own swollen, cracked nose block his air. Hannibal bucks, but it’s perfunctory, all his attention on the blade in his belly. He fists a hand around the double’s knife, shoving back hard against the grip holding it. Hannibal breaks the double’s wrist, quick and messy, flipping the knife blade up and back against its crunched-glass carpals. With a pained snarl, he holds the hilt tight and throws the three of them forward.

The blade pierces through the double’s chest as they hit the ground.

The double doesn't bleed, doesn’t feel pain — not exactly — but Will does. He screams, wrist pulsing in sympathetic agony, chest burning as if skewered in two places. He gets an arm around Hannibal through the pain turning the edges of his vision white. He slides fingers into the burning heat of the wound in his belly.

Will’s other arm loosens on Hannibal's neck, because he wants to touch. Wants to get his hand on Hannibal's throat, just like always, because even as he kills him, he wants — he *wants*— fuck, he wants *so much*.

The double beneath them pushes up and seizes Hannibal's hair, dragging him into a fierce and biting kiss.

Its inky flesh turns into curling, cold smoke in Hannibal’s mouth.

Hannibal and Will collapse the last few inches to the hardwood.

Will gasps, the impact driving his hand deeper into Hannibal's belly. Blood and shredded flesh and worse cover his fingers. The cut was not clean. The wound is already fouling, and Hannibal is going to die. He's going to die painfully in Will's arms, and Will is ecstatic and filled with horrible regret.

His bleeding side doesn't feel like a steep enough price to have paid, the mosaic of injuries to his face from Gideon a cheap substitute, and the phantom pain from his double has vanished. Will's hand on Hannibal's throat tightens, even as the rest of him gentles. He nuzzles against the side of Hannibal's head, curling himself around the Ripper's body.

"Thank you," he whispers, "for seeing all of me. For giving me this, before it all comes crashing down. But I can't — I can't keep it."

"You can," Hannibal gasps, a heaving rasp that barely scrapes from his vocal cords.

No, Will thinks, and holds on tighter. He wants to, and he can't let himself have it. "Stop. Stop, I can't—"

Another pained inhalation quiets him. He attends, quivering, as Hannibal twists just enough to look him in the eye.

"I forgive you, Will," he says.

And then Hannibal grits his teeth and pushes up, knees under him even as his belly bleeds and bleeds, the floor slippery underneath them both. He rolls and slams Will back into the ground, hard enough to startle Will's grip and drag a shout from him. Hannibal curls an arm around his middle and hunches forward on his knees. The dark red beneath him is flat-black in the shadow of the dining room table.

Will stares, winded, gasping for air, as Hannibal begins to tear at himself.

At first, it looks only like pain and panic, as he rips his way out of his mangled shirt. But then he keeps going, short nails hooking into flesh, from the apex of the knife wound up and up, bloodied skin shearing from the rippling ink-black *something* beneath. Ribbons of pale skin slip through Hannibal's fingers, dissolving like so many of Will's doubles before they ever hit the ground.

Antlers crack their way from his skull, bone groaning and protesting, flesh splitting. Will remembers this from his dream, *their* dream, of Hannibal surrounded by antlers, Hannibal with wet, bony wounds not quite covered by his hair, but this is real. This is *real*, and Will can only watch, helpless, too stunned to sob.

Hannibal doesn't make any noise either beyond his breaths, labored, shallow with effort and pain.

His limbs elongate, ribs and hips and all the places bone meets bone pressing out stark against pitch-dark skin. The knife wound knits itself closed even as the belly beneath it sinks in starving absence. The imprints of Will's teeth on the back of his neck glaze over, smooth

into the expanse of the monster's flesh. Hannibal's breathing eases, slows, and he hunches over with his hands braced on the ground, his spine a range of knobbed peaks.

Will clutches at his side and finally, finally tries to get up, to get away, but the *thing* that Hannibal has become, the shadow ripped from his nightmares, darts over and shoves him back to the ground. He wrenches Will's hand away and bends to slide his pink tongue into the wound.

Will's Mark flares as fresh pain tears through him, blistering and liquid hot, and he writhes. He tries to focus enough to call a double, but he can't think, or they aren't listening. His head aches, and he has fought for his life twice today, and he doesn't know that he can survive a third time.

Not like this.

"No, no, no, no — " he begs, one hand grasping for a handhold. An antler, the prominent jut of a shoulder, his throat again. But he falters, because — because if Hannibal can't be killed, then the only remaining option is Will's own obliteration. He can't be trusted, can't be allowed free.

And isn't it such a better fate to be devoured than to turn himself over to the Inquisitors? They will never understand him, not like this.

Will's hand finds one antler, but he doesn't push the monster away. He just holds on.

Hannibal nudges Will's ruined shirt aside to bare his Mark and presses a single kiss against it. His bloody mouth leaves a dripping red imprint. He reaches up and tugs Will's fingers off him, one by one, then gets to his feet and walks out of the room.

Will stares at the empty doorway, a thin, questioning whine leaking out of him as all his certainty shatters.

Shuddering, he forces himself onto his belly. Pain blots out his vision in a wave of dark spots, and he heaves, forehead pressed to the floor. He has to move. Has to — has to go after him. He can't stay here. He can't — he needs —

Don't leave me.

"Hannibal," he gasps, barely a sound at all, pushing up onto his knees. Up onto his feet. He sways, blood pulsing down his side. He doesn't look back at Gideon's corpse as he staggers into the hall. His bloody hand leaves streaks on the wall every time he nearly falls.

But Will keeps going. If he doesn't, he might start screaming and never stop.

He finds Hannibal by the front door, holding, of all things, his medical bag. It looks minuscule in his warped, elongated fingers. Laughable. Will looks between the bag and the monster, uncomprehending. It makes no sense.

This is what Gideon saw at the lighthouse, he thinks. *This is why he knew we weren't the same*. But it's so close to what he'd imagined. He'd known. He'd *known*. Some part of him

had always known.

Hannibal crosses the floor between them in time to ease Will to the ground and against the wall when his legs give out. He sets the bag down at Will's side.

"You're — supposed — to eat me," Will whispers, shivering uncontrollably. He can almost feel Hannibal's teeth on his belly, and one of his hands drifts there, plucking anxiously at his shirt.

"Eating you would be a lie. Not for me, but for you. You believe you will find absolution inside me and die a hero's death," Hannibal says, reaching into the kit. "But I have never lied to you, Will. Not outright."

He removes a set of shears, pulls them wide to expose the blades, and takes Will's hand away from his stomach. He closes Will's fingers around the grips. A palm-sized piece of tar-black skin across his neck hardens like fired clay, cracks and falls away. Hannibal tilts his head, an offering, and guides the blade of the shears against new, pink skin.

"Forgiveness is too great and difficult for one person. It requires two: betrayer and betrayed," Hannibal murmurs. "This is a forgiveness I can offer you, Will, if you wish to take it."

Will wants to weep. May be weeping already.

"This is all I have left," Will says. A plea, not an explanation. "I can't walk away. I can't let them have you. All I can do — all I can do is end this, or die trying, you *did this to me*— "

His hand doesn't move. He can't do it. He can't cut Hannibal's throat, not now. He put everything into the first attack because there could never be a second.

"They don't have me. You do," Hannibal says, smoothing Will's curls out of the way with skeletal fingers. "I am giving you my life, Will, and if you truly wish to take it from me, you will do it with both of our full knowledge. No more surprises. No more deceptions. Do you want me dead by your hand?"

Tears streak down Will's face, undeniable now. "Eat or be eaten, and I can't — I can't — "

His shaking makes the blades slice shallowly into Hannibal's skin, and at the sight of blood, Will cries out and hurls the shears away. He shuts his eyes, presses his palms right to the orbits, and shakes, and shakes, and shakes.

Hannibal presses his forehead to Will's and cups his palm against the red slice up his ribs.

"Will. *Will*. It is going to hurt, but I need you to breathe." His voice is unchanged. Familiar, so familiar that it's agony to hear it. But the touch of his skin is all wrong, leathery and dry and too cold.

"You didn't let me kill you," Will says, sobs. He can't control his body, doesn't see the point anymore.

He can't see where anything goes from this moment. All he sees is Gideon and himself and Hannibal, Hannibal who has become a monster in truth, the creature birthed from his nightmares, the Unnamed made flesh —

One of his hands leaves his face only to grab an antler once more. He hangs on. He is only what he can hold, the warmth of living bone and velvet. Everything else falls away.

Will manages one full breath. Another. His chest keeps hitching and it *hurts*.

Hannibal moves, and Will hears something shift in the medical bag. He doesn't look. He only stares at Hannibal's distorted features as Hannibal braces his shoulder against the wall and holds him hard.

On Will's next rattling inhale, Hannibal slips two pills onto his tongue, then holds one long-fingered hand over his mouth. The swelling in his nose does the rest.

Will panics.

He kicks out, pushes on the antler, anything he can think to get Hannibal to move his hand, but the pills are already bitter on his tongue, and he is desperate, so desperate, wants to beg *please don't leave me.* He never thought he could fear oblivion this much.

The pills fall to the back of his throat in his thrashing. His body tries to rebel. It fails.

Will swallows, his hand slipping from the antler, pressing instead against the pink patch of skin on Hannibal's throat. The only recognizable part of the monster.

(That's not true. He recognizes every inch of him.)

Hannibal uncovers his mouth. His hand has left a sticky print across Will's face. Will watches, distantly, as Hannibal licks the blood from his fingers, one by one. Then he holds Will's palm more firmly against his bare skin.

"You can make it all go away," he murmurs. "Put your head back. Close your eyes. Wade into the quiet of the stream."

Will shakes his head.

"No," he protests, and it sounds terrifyingly weak. "No, no, you'll leave."

Hannibal has to. How could he not? Will is too much of a danger, can't be anything else.

He doesn't want to drift. He wants to stay right here, even though it hurts, because he can't bear the thought of waking up alone. Dying would be preferable. So much preferable.

The hand not on Hannibal's throat explores, grasping and desperate. Every inch of him is bones, just bones. He must be so hungry. Always so hungry. It hurts to think about, to see, to touch. Will lets out a low moan of pain. But everywhere Will's fingers go, Hannibal's transformed skin goes matte, breaking away in pieces. Hannibal is a patchwork of midnight black and raw new skin.

“Don’t leave me,” Will whispers. “Can’t — can’t survive the separation.”

Hannibal pulls him away from the wall and cradles him in his arms.

“Neither can I,” Hannibal says, low, into his hair. “When have I ever abandoned you?”

Will’s breathing hitches as he remembers their third dream: Hannibal finding and keeping his lifeless body, holding him close, mourning and refusing to let go. His arms slide around Hannibal, over those protruding ribs and the fractured topography of his skin. It falls away to reveal the Hannibal Will has known, so different from the flow of darkness over Will’s doubles, so much more physical.

“Never,” he concedes, but then he shivers again. “Abandonment requires expectation.”

And now, Will has learned to expect Hannibal to stay — and to fear that he might not.

His head is spinning.

At some point, Hannibal stands, Will in his arms. They move, or Hannibal moves, and Will is aware of stairs. His head lolls. He manages to keep it from falling back, but only just. His side aches, and the injuries from his fight with Gideon along with it, but it’s all so distant, as is the sharp edge of Hannibal’s emaciated arms supporting him.

Upstairs, he thinks, hazily. Not to the kitchen. Not to a cellar.

“Don’t leave me,” Will mumbles again, but the words are indistinct. By the time they leave the stairs behind, he’s falling into an abyss, dark water blooming with blood. It swallows up all sound and light.

He sleeps, dreamless, in the Ripper’s arms.

Hannibal leaves Will on the bed in the second floor guest room, propped up on his side.

Before he returns downstairs for his medical kit, he shuts his eyes, hooks a clawed finger under one of the fractures Will’s touch left behind and starts to peel himself free. Piece by piece the black falls away and dissolves into thin air, leaving him entirely naked, skin raw. Pitch black velvet curls off his antlers and falls around him like snow, accompanied by the strange prickle of blood flow ceasing as they turn the off-white of old bone. He cracks his neck with a hum of pleasure before reaching up to break off the antlers one by one. They come off like loose teeth —*moments of rocking, wiggling back and forth, then a sharp, exacting yank*— jagged bases wet with dark red.

Hannibal had always figured this power of his had been the Unnamed’s version of a joke: being able to heal even grievous wounds, but only if he shed his person suit and bared the starving thing underneath. It seems disorder itself is fond of irony and realizing metaphor.

Hannibal dislikes his other form greatly. It had only been out of self-preservation that he had transformed at the lighthouse. To his credit, Abel Gideon hadn’t so much as batted an eye. Gideon was saner than anyone gave him credit for, but not entirely.

By the time he reaches his bedroom, the places where the antlers were have closed over with skull and scalp. He sets them aside to deal with later *—they never fade, always a reminder—* and dresses quickly. When he returns to the guest room with his medical bag and supplies, he works methodically and efficiently, stripping Will to his underclothes and piling the bloody fabric in the corner *—to burn later; so much from today will have to be fuel for the fire.* He pockets Will's house key when he finds it.

The wound over Will's flank is deep but his ribs blunted the bite of the scalpel; Hannibal can trace the path of little nicks down each bone when he spreads the split open with two clean fingers. To say the thought of eating Will hasn't crossed his mind would be a lie *—it has several times, and not just when his tongue has been inside Will or in the fresh, coppery heat of the wound he's currently stitching.* But in the end, Hannibal has so few regrets and he has never wanted to regret anything regarding Will.

So Hannibal wipes down and disinfects the wound, and lays twenty-three sutures. He mops the blood from Will's face and cleans the rest of him for good measure. Then he rifles around in the back of the wardrobe and extracts the bindings he used for Miriam Lass. He ties Will down. It's far more complicated with Will on his side, but, sleepwalking or no, he is not going anywhere.

And Hannibal lingers, taking a seat on the edge of the bed and softly tracing a hand up and down Will's side. He watches Will's ragged little breaths, hitching even in the grip of chloral hydrate, as understanding dawns on him. Even in such a short amount of time, Will has gotten under his skin, has excavated out that shallow chasm inside him when his back was turned. Now, standing on the edge of it, Hannibal sees there is so much further to fall. More than he ever thought possible.

Hannibal had long since grown comfortable with the idea that he would always be alone. But he has Will now. And he is not letting him go.

Can't survive the separation, Will had said.

—no, he certainly doesn't think either of them could—

He brushes a kiss to Will's jaw just before he locks the door and leaves.

After ensuring he looks somewhat presentable, Hannibal hails a carriage to Will's house. The kitchen is nothing short of incriminating when he arrives, but turpentine from Will's cellar takes good care of the floors and simple carbolic soap and water in the basin cleans the knives bright and shining. Next he wipes down the bloody prints Will had tracked around the house and scrubs the sink in his upstairs washroom until it shines. In the process, he notices that the large trunk that had once resided at the foot of Will's bed is missing.

When he leaves, the house smells of nothing but abrasives and white clover.

His own house is somewhat more of a mess. The blood on the walls and floors is fresher, so Hannibal doesn't have to scrub nearly as hard *—he really should repaint the walls, scour them clean with lime wash*. The house still stinks of copper and vinegar and turpentine —

opening the windows in the drawing room and bringing out his stash of heavily bergamot-scented candles should help with that— but it is clean.

He is thoroughly unsurprised to find Will's missing trunk tucked neatly out of the way in the kitchen. It stinks of blood and loosed bowels. Undoubtedly both belonged to Abel Gideon. Hannibal drags it out to the back garden, empties it on its side into the soil, and cleans it out with water from the handpump in the last fading minutes of daylight.

He turns to the dining room table next, to Gideon, a portrait of Will's messy insides turned out. He hefts the body down into the hidden cellar where the rest of his butchery is done. It has been some time since he's been presented with a whole body to process, and more still since he's been able to do it in the privacy of his own home, but he is, as in all things, prepared. The situation is less than ideal, with how long Gideon has already been dead, but the delay was unavoidable. Will's safety and care supersedes even his hunger *—a new feeling, surprisingly not unwelcome.*

He will simply have to be creative.

Normally, Hannibal would gut a pig first, but in this case, he needs the heart intact. He places a large-bore needle into Gideon's femoral artery, and another in the jugular vein. Both are then attached to lengths of rubber tubing, the former to a large glass bottle of saline solution, the latter open into a bucket. He suspends the bottle and allows it time to work the coagulated blood from Gideon's body, and tilts the table just enough to let gravity help.

In the meantime, he washes the flesh, inventories the myriad injuries, discards the enucleated eyes. Will has done quite a lot of damage. There is a chance that the meat has already been irreparably tainted. He can only hope that some can be salvaged.

When the patter of clotted blood into the bucket breaks the silence of the cellar, Hannibal allows himself a small moment of satisfaction. Then he makes a clean midline slice down Gideon's abdomen, revealing contused organs but no fetid odors or signs of rupture *—Will's gift can be enjoyed in another way after all*. He removes the abdominal organs with care, the first time in over a year that he has had the excuse *—the requirement —* that he leave nothing behind.

He has to discard one kidney, but the rest is salvageable. He sets to work cleaning the intestines, thinking idly of how Will's hands had felt on his own *—claiming, like nothing he's ever felt before; always a hedonist in his pursuit of new and interesting experiences*. As Gideon continues to drain, he sets to sharpening his knives, taking stock of the condition of his tools.

When the trickle slows, at last, Hannibal removes heart and lungs, both inedible; the heart is a mess from blood clots and the force of the solution to clear it, and Gideon's lungs are sticky with the black pockets he's come to associate with habitual smokers. A shame, but not directly Will's fault.

It's a simple thing to slip the meat hook between Gideon's tibias and fibulas, punch it through the tendons of the tibialis anterior, and hoist him into the air. He leaves the meat to finish cooling. A day or so to dry should make the butchery much more manageable.

A collection of candles replaces the body on the scrubbed-down dining table.

The basket with Gideon's gift comes last. Hannibal covertly takes the entire basket to the nearest back alleyway, wedges open one of the sewer covers, and neatly drops it all in. Too close to spoiling after the long day and none of it as precious as what Will has brought him. Finally, twilight long since darkened to proper night, he gathers up the bloody clothing, rags, and sheets and burns them in the small stone pit in the back garden.

When he returns to the house, he selects a book from his library and returns to the second floor bedroom. Hannibal unties Will and barely has to lean over him to smell the waves of saccharine heat settling over him like a fog, dense and cloying. Fever, burning through his brain with a vengeance Hannibal has never seen the likes of before. He pulls a blanket over Will's sleeping form before carrying the chair in the corner of the room to the side of the bed.

Hannibal props the book against his knee, brushes his thumb against Will's forehead, and settles in.

When the bonds are gone and the drugs begin to loosen their grip, Will drifts.

Dreams.

The asylum is cold and crowded, and Will is screaming. Crawford stands on the other side of the bars, and Will reaches, desperate, begging. It wasn't him. *It wasn't him*. Gideon's blood is on him, no matter how many times they hose him down, but the others — the others were Hannibal, they were Hannibal, *Hannibal is the Ripper*—

But Hannibal stands beside Crawford, and looks with pity on the broken man who has lost his mind, who forgot his own crimes, who thought he bore the Unnamed's Mark.

Will tears at his clothing and finds no Mark at all, just a snarl of bloody cuts, and Hannibal is leaving, and his brain is on fire, and —

And antlers grow from Hannibal's head, and Will knows, then, that he has cut the Mark from his chest, he has left Will powerless and alone in order to save himself, and Will can do nothing to stop him.

Will wakes screaming.

Something is holding him down, firm brackets around his wrists, and Will thrashes. His eyes are open, but he still sees the asylum. Feels it, all around him, feels shackles on his wrists.

And Hannibal is there. "You're alright, Will," he croons, and the sound of his voice wrenches a sob from Will. "You have a fever and a rather large number of stitches in your side liable to tear."

You don't care, he wants to yell, but his throat is closed tight. *You don't care, you left me, you* —

But Hannibal hasn’t left him. Hannibal is right here, holding him immobile. He isn’t in the asylum. He’s in the guest room, where he has been before. Where he was safe.

Will stares up into Hannibal's face, wide-eyed and only half-aware. He sees both the man and the monster, overlaid atop one another.

He doesn’t know what he wants. He doesn’t know what he feels. He only knows that it is all-consuming, that he is *drowning* in it. He should be relieved, maybe, he *wants* to be relieved. He hasn't been cast aside, hasn't been sacrificed.

But he can't make sense of anything. Can’t imagine any future beyond the nightmare. Tears leak from his eyes. His hands spasm, and he flexes against Hannibal’s grip on his wrists. He doesn’t remember if he needs to fight this.

"Hannibal?" he whispers, afraid saying his name will make him disappear. He tries to move again, then cries out as pain lances up his side. He remembers. He remembers the scalpel. Remembers so much blood and heat, and Hannibal transforming —

But he's back now. Or at least Will can't see the antlers. Not anymore. They’ve disappeared again, and there is only the man, even if he squints.

Hannibal holds Will tighter. He smiles.

Leaning forward and pressing his cheek to Will’s damp forehead, he murmurs, “I’m going to let go of you. Stay on the bed, please.”

Will shivers, but nods. It’s confusion and fear as much as trust that keeps him in place when Hannibal pulls away.

"Gideon," he mumbles, gaze tracking Hannibal as best he's able to. "Is he really — did I — "

He knows he did. But maybe he didn't. Everything seems unreal, too bright and too distant, but he remembers the details, still. The dead weight of the body as he’d shoved it into a trunk, loaded it onto the carriage that took him across town with few questions asked. The way his thumbs had slipped into Gideon's fractured orbits. How *wrong* it had felt to bite into flesh that wasn’t Hannibal’s, and how it had given beneath his teeth all the same. But maybe — maybe it didn't happen, and he can still go back. Pack everything neatly away.

(He can't. He knows he can't. He doesn't want to know that.)

Hannibal has his medical bag now. He sets it neatly on the chair pulled up close beside the bed. *He was waiting for me to wake up*, Will thinks, blearily.

“You were Abel Gideon’s final enemy. In death, you defined him and he is more important for it, more important than the life he clamored after,” Hannibal says, plucking a bottle and syringe from the bag. “There is a mantra in medical education, Will: watch one, do one, teach one. And you have seen plenty.”

The words dance almost visible in the air between them.

It happened. It’s true. Will’s eyes close for a moment as he lets the knowledge wash over him, confirmation of what he is.

Of what there will never be a return from.

He opens his eyes again when Hannibal takes his arm, rolls it over, palm up, and holds it tight so he can’t jerk away. He stares down at the gleam of the needle, poised to sink into the crook of his arm.

“How did it feel?” Hannibal asks, not closing that last breath of space between metal and flesh. “To manipulate what was a living man into a message all of your own.”

Transcendent.

It had been the purest clarity Will has ever known. But he can’t find the word, any word, and he moans instead. His hands flex. His heels push into the bed, and for a moment, he wonders if he could run.

He’s so heavy, and he doesn’t *want* to run. He came here for a reason.

“I needed you to see,” Will whispers. “I needed it to mean something. It would have been a — a waste, otherwise. Of the gift of him.”

And it had always been a gift.

“The tragedy is not to die, but to be wasted,” Hannibal agrees.

He presses long fingers against Will’s elbow, feeling for something, then slips the needle in. Will winces at the injection, but it's a small thing, just a pinprick.

“We both needed to know,” Will says, more urgently now, needing to be understood, “before the end.”

“I see, Will,” Hannibal murmurs. His voice is low, gentle and hypnotic. “I see you. I always have. And I am honored by your gift and the knowledge it brings us both.” He slips the needle out. “But if anything is ending, it is only doing so in the service of becoming something new.”

Will’s fingers flex against the sheets. His eyes dart back and forth as his mind produces a tumble of images, too fast and too haphazard to resolve.

"I'm scared," he whispers, finally.

He never meant to get this far.

"I was supposed to cut off my hand," he adds, as his eyelids grow heavy. "That was...the plan. Always."

Hannibal watches as Will drifts, only pulling away when he has slipped fully under. He retrieves the bindings from where he looped them earlier and, mindful of Will's injuries, begins to tie him securely to the bed frame. Will shifts, eyelids twitching and mouth twisting, but the drugs hold him fast, enough morphine in his veins to sedate him until dawn.

Hannibal is watching him, admiring each little movement, when Will's eyes slide open anyway. They are entirely black.

"This," the Unnamed says with Will's tongue, "is not how I expected the day to end. You both continue to surprise me."

It does not glance at the bonds, nor does it test them. It just looks at Hannibal, expression neutral. Almost serene.

Hannibal secures the last knot against the rightmost bedpost. "I take it you've been enjoying your observation."

"You have acted as an elegant agent of my influence today; he did not predict this, and his potential actions from this moment forward are…multitudinous." The Unnamed smiles, that uncanny thing. "He wanted you to eat him. He will always resent that you did not."

"I considered it. I can't claim I won't consider it again." Hannibal tugs at the knot —*secure, but there is no trusting this force of the universe, chaos made flesh*— and turns his attention back to the Unnamed. "What he makes me feel is beyond my conscious ability to control or predict or negotiate. A force of mind and circumstance. I can only hope that, in time, he can forgive me."

The Unnamed explores the bounds of the bonds now that they are firmly set, Will's body shifting in a way that feels too sensual, too private to be enjoyed by the entity inside him. Hannibal can't help but watch the way Will's muscles elongate and shift underneath his skin.

Will is not present. He should look away. He doesn't.

Hannibal gains a thrill of satisfaction when the Unnamed suddenly feels the pull of the sutures and gasps, Will's eyes widening —*so unaccustomed to the reality of pain that it is surprised; he wants the Unnamed to remember that feeling.*

"He dreamed of the asylum," it says after a moment, gaze returning to him. "A dream I gave him. A path you did not take. You used his trust and his growing fever to unravel his mind, and gift all your notoriety to him. They all believed you, that it was him who had held the knife all those times. You would have regretted it, but not before enjoying his captivity. Kept always where you could find him, seeing you and being alone with that sight."

A path Hannibal didn't take. A curious path, one that would likely delight him, but one that hadn't occurred to him. He had been too drawn in by Will, wanted him too much. And Will's time being led around at the end of a string was already rapidly running out when Hannibal had turned Gideon's sights on the house in the water districts.

“Participation is often the price of sight.” Hannibal keeps his face and tone mild as he parrots the Unnamed’s own words back at it. “Awareness of all the paths before us can be gained in exchange for a measure of will. I would prefer to keep my will.”

The Unnamed watches Hannibal closely, though it’s hard to tell what it’s thinking with the blank darkness of its eyes. “Yes, I imagine you would. And now that you have him, what will you do with him? Repair that which is shattered, or build something new from the wreckage? Left to his own devices, the pieces will get smaller and smaller. He will break himself against the walls of his desires.”

“Repair can be its own act of creation. Will can survive what is happening to him, but I will not leave him to survive it alone,” Hannibal answers. He moves back to the headboard and checks the knot securing Will’s left wrist to the bed. “And I will do what is best for him.”

—best for Will or best for him is not so much a question; if he must, he will make sure their goals align—

“Admirable of you. Loyal. But Hannibal — ” The Unnamed flexes the fingers of Will’s left hand, half a beckon to lean in close and listen. “Don’t trust Will Graham.”

And then Will’s eyes slip closed.

Chapter End Notes

A peek into the co-writing process for this chapter:

discord chat bullshit

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

“You’re alive because I want you to be,” Hannibal says. “I’m trying to keep you that way.”

Will’s not sure whether to be elated or terrified. He can almost feel the weight of scissors in his hands, and cool, leathery skin under his fingertips. His gaze tracks up to Hannibal’s face, over familiar cheekbones and lips and eyes, and if he squints, he can still see the antlers.

“What are you?”

--

Will starts to understand. Hannibal has something to lose. Together, they dream.

Will does not dream.

No antlers, no asylums, just a warm muzzy sleep of morphine and fever. When he wakes, sometime past dawn, he wakes gently. His side doesn’t hurt, not yet, but the memory of pain is near the surface, and soft bindings keep him from moving too suddenly.

He tests those bindings. Studies them in the thin light of early morning, curious, not awake enough to panic.

He feels —

He feels sick. Tired. Wrong, in how he fits inside his skin. Fluid, like he’s spilling.

The door to the bedroom is firmly shut.

“Hannibal?” Will calls out, hesitant and suddenly aware that he risks not receiving an answer.

But the door unlocks and opens fast enough to quell his rising agitation, and Hannibal is there, balancing a tray of food in one hand. He’s neatly dressed, shirt cuffed evenly to his elbows and his hair as perfectly set as Will’s ever seen it. The disparity makes Will feel like a living stain, offensive and out of place. But Hannibal doesn’t seem to mark it as he sets the tray on the dresser, then crosses to the bedpost and the rope wrapped around Will’s left foot and says, “You really must mind your stitches, Will.”

“Trying,” he says. He watches blearily as Hannibal unbinds his ankles. “Why am I tied up?”

Well, a part of him supplies, *you did try to kill him*. One of his hands flexes, the one that slid beneath Hannibal's skin.

But Hannibal doesn't seem afraid. And neither is Will, not really, though he thinks that perhaps he should be.

"You have the habit of leaving bedrooms not under your own power," Hannibal says and helps him ease upright, propped up against pillows. It sends his brain sloshing in his skull again, and he tries to track Hannibal's movements as he retrieves the tray and lowers it to eye level. "I've brought you breakfast. Silkie chicken in a broth. A black-boned bird that has long been prized for its medicinal value. With wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates and star anise to promote healing. There is also fresh sourdough, if you're feeling up to it, and willow bark tea, which I must insist on."

The soup smells good. But Will looks at his wrists, still bound, frowning.

"I'm not sleeping now," he says, uncertainty turning to wariness. "You're not going to let me up?"

Hannibal doesn't answer that. He doesn't reach for the ropes, either. He just gives Will a knowing look as he sets the tray on the bedside table and sits down in the chair next to it, close enough that his knees brush the side of the bed. He picks up the tea cup and brings it close to Will's mouth. A question.

"It's cooled enough," he says and lifts the cup to Will's lips.

Something in Will falters. He is somewhere between prisoner and patient, and the longer he thinks about Hannibal keeping him tied down, the more the hazy fear from the day before flares back to life.

No. He can't go back there. He will stay here, now, with Hannibal attending to him. Caring for him. (The morphine still in his system helps the decision go down easier.)

Will takes an obedient sip of the tea. It's as bitter as it's always been, and the flavor sends him immediately back to his own kitchen, drowning under the weight of his realizations. His breath hitches, barely strangling a cry. He barely manages to swallow the sip before jerking his head away, shutting his eyes.

"Was drinking the tea," he manages, wanting, *needing* Hannibal to understand, "when I realized — and then Gideon — I don't want the tea."

Don't make me go back there.

"I understand," Hannibal says. His hand smooths along Will's jaw — then ruthlessly tugs his head back to center.

Will opens his eyes and stares at Hannibal. His breathing picks up.

"You have to bring your fever down." He levels a look at Will and says, "Would you like to observe or participate?"

Hannibal is right, of course he's right, and something in the firmness of his touch breaks through Will's runaway pain.

His cock gives a confused, desperate twitch.

Will opens his mouth.

Hannibal's lips pull into a smile. He lifts the cup so Will can drink. He doesn't look away.

The tea is still bitter, but Hannibal's gaze on his and the silken pressure of the ropes pinning his hands in place keep him present. The world grows small and simple: drink the tea. He does, even as his skin warms and prickles all over.

When the cup is empty, Hannibal sets it aside and stands. It takes effort for Will not to whine at the distance. It's an animal impulse, and he lets his head fall back against the headboard, fighting it, breathing heavily as he watches Hannibal undo the ropes.

A reward for good behavior. An acknowledgment that Will is, in this moment, not a threat.

Hannibal returns and places the tray in Will's lap before settling into the chair once more, crossing his legs.

"It is chicken," Hannibal reassures him. "Now that we both have an understanding about what I serve at my table."

Will flushes, and he isn't sure if it's with horror or intrigue.

He hadn't felt disgust, when everything had finally clicked into place the day before. Overwhelmed, yes, but there was none of the gut-deep nausea that he thinks a normal person would have experienced, knowing what he'd eaten at the Ripper's table. Of course, it was only a minor piece of the great shattering of everything, but —

He makes himself look at the soup. He picks up his spoon, and fishes out a bit of the meat. Black boned and black fleshed. He blinks, and sees an inky finger. Blinks, and it's just chicken; he can recognize the pebbled texture of the skin.

"It looks," Will says, very softly, "like it could have been cut from one of my doubles."

He considers, then takes a bite. It's delicious, just like everything Hannibal has ever fed him.

"It hadn't occurred to me to serve you one of your doubles," Hannibal says, gaze tracking Will's spoon from bowl to mouth with an intensity that makes Will shiver. After a moment, he adds, "Though the idea certainly has its appeal."

Will prods at another chunk of meat. The idea doesn't horrify him like it should. Doesn't even cause a twinge of distress at his own self-murder. He wonders if the doubles taste like anything. If they taste like *him*.

(He wonders how many drugs Hannibal has him on.)

Hannibal shifts, enough to catch Will's attention. "I need to know if you're going to try to kill me again, Will."

Will pauses before taking a second bite, and his eyes drop to Hannibal's wrists. Unblemished. *Healed,* just like the wound to his gut.

So it is that. But Hannibal isn't afraid, and he isn't angry. It's more of...a logistical consideration, free of emotion. That rankles, slightly. It *should* be emotional.

Will is definitely emotional about it.

He manages the second bite, chewing to give his fevered mind time to come up with a response that feels right. "I don't intend to," he says, finally. "I don't think I could succeed, and I don't — "

He stops. Trails the spoon through the bowl as his mind brushes up against the last day's betrayal, anger, fear. He'd been so close to — to — if not to salvation, then to an answer, an endpoint, and now he's not sure he'll ever reach it. His face contorts in pain at the thought. He wants to be anywhere but here, but if he were anywhere else, the isolation would crush him.

"Why did you let me get close?" Will asks, needing to know that, at least. Needing to know how everything got so twisted back on itself. He has to ask. He tries to gather himself up, solid and real, but saying it out loud makes him feel like a river threatening to jump its banks. "Why am I still alive?"

"You're alive because I want you to be," Hannibal says. "I'm trying to keep you that way."

He's not sure whether to be elated or terrified. He can almost feel the weight of scissors in his hands, and cool, leathery skin under his fingertips. His gaze tracks up to Hannibal's face, over familiar cheekbones and lips and eyes, and if he squints, he can still see the antlers.

"What *are* you?"

An excellent question. There are a hundred ways to answer and all of them true. He is Hannibal Lecter, the surgeon, the physician. Hannibal the Ripper, with dozens of bodies in his wake. He is Hannibal, Marked, changed, with a hungry darkness underneath his skin.

What am I ?

An amalgamation of blood and flesh and bones. That's all anything ever is, in the beginning. At the end.

Hannibal reaches for Will —*prays as much as he ever does that Will doesn't shake it off.* Will doesn't move away but goes very still, watchful as the space closes between them. Hannibal's hand finds its home easily, as if he's worn places on Will's neck smooth into the shape of his fingers, the curls smooth under his attention.

He tries to riddle through Will's expression *—he knows what Will sees; it's more about gauging lucidity.* "I am the same as I ever was. A Marked man, with all that entails."

There is none of last night's panic in Will's eyes as they drop to Hannibal's throat, but he is still vague with fever. His thoughts have been meandering, jumping suddenly in new directions, and now more than ever, Hannibal is not sure what he will do next.

Will reaches out, as if to touch, but stops short. "A man made of smoke, unable to be killed," he says, gaze returning to his face. "Or are you the Unnamed made flesh?"

"No more than you are. No more than the rest of the Marked." Hannibal gives him the barest hint of a smile. "Anyone can be killed, Will. There are some injuries too grievous to come back from."

"I gutted you," Will says, voice a strangled blend of awe and disgust, and his brow furrows. "But then there was nothing there. You were *empty*."

"For a time. I was hungry once. Desperately hungry. I imagine the Unnamed thinks it's incredibly clever, reminding me of that part of my past. It's a gift, one that's pointed on both ends. But I always return to my present, to myself." Hannibal takes Will's uncertain hand and guides it away from his throat down to his stomach. "I always heal without scarring, but I still feel your touch inside. A mark of your own."

Will's hand flattens, fingers spread wide, grasping. "I was made to kill you. I *wanted* to kill you." His lips quirk. "I just didn't want you to die." He shudders, face contorting in pain. "Murder as a form of ownership."

"It is. And I *am* yours, Will."

Careful not to disrupt the tray, Hannibal leans forward and catches Will's mouth in a kiss. Gentle, so soft it's barely a brush of lips, mindful of new wounds and old ones. Will presses into the kiss with barely leashed desperation, but just as quickly flinches away. He looks down, and their foreheads rest together as he pants. But for all his avoidance, the hand not still clutching the spoon twitches once, twice, then raises to Hannibal's head, fingers lacing into his hair.

Hannibal tries to lean back, but Will's fingers keep him firmly in place *—he wouldn't untangle them for the world though his neck might protest this position after so long.* Will shakes, trapped between fear and desire.

"Don't let your soup get cold," Hannibal murmurs.

He draws a finger lightly down the bandages over Will's side. A reminder.

Will inhales sharply but does, after a moment, let him go.

He feeds himself several more spoonfuls of soup, hunting through the broth as though searching for something in particular.

"Will?"

Will flinches, and when he looks up, his expression is almost hunted. “I don’t know what happens now,” he confesses, voice barely above a whisper.

There are once more far too many ways to give him an answer and Hannibal doesn’t know what Will is looking for. He wishes, and it’s hardly the first time he’s wished it, that he could open Will up and see, just see, what is turning over and over in his mind. He never knows, truly, only guesses. Only hopes.

“Jack has no doubt found the gift left for Abel Gideon at the lighthouse,” he answers.

Will frowns. “The gift left for—” He cuts himself off, then sways slightly, gaze turning inward. Trying to muddle through the implication of it.

“I killed the lighthouse keeper,” Hannibal says, not wanting Will to overtax himself, or to retreat inside himself any more than he is prone to do. “I imagine the display has kept Jack busy for some time.” He looks out the lightening sky outside the window and amends, “Though by now I’d imagine he's already making his way to your home. He won’t find anything incriminating, should he have seen fit to break down the door. When you return, I’m afraid you’ll need to buy more turpentine.”

—though in all his scrubbing and tidying, the one part of Gideon he never did find was the man’s lips—

“Thorough,” Will murmurs. His attention has returned to his food, and he nudges at a bit of date with his spoon. “But what comes *next?”*

“As your physician, I wouldn’t have you too far from bed until your fever breaks.” Hannibal goes quiet for a very long moment and then says, “As more than that, I don’t wish to keep you here against your will.”

It would be so easy to make Will stay *—he doesn’t know how Will would come out of it, but deep, selfish desires often aren’t logical—* he wants Will to want to stay and all he can think is *please*.

Will doesn’t immediately speak, but works through the rest of his soup.

“I don’t want to go home,” he says, as he sets the spoon down. His expression turns forlorn, devastated in the space of a breath. Something Hannibal isn’t sure he would normally be allowed to see. “I don’t know how to be there anymore.”

“Your space has been changed irrevocably. By Gideon, by me. You will return there, in time, and you will change it again,” Hannibal says. “Jack will likely head here once he finds you’re not at home, but I will deal with him. He has other ponies in his stable.”

“They aren’t nearly this broken,” Will says, smiling weakly. The thin layer of sweat that has accumulated on his forehead since he woke gleams as sunlight reaches the bed.

“You’re hardly a broken pony,” Hannibal corrects, and places the back of his hand against Will’s brow. Will shivers; likely not a simple response to the temperature he is still running,

but it can't be ruled out. "Simply ridden hard and put away wet."

Will laughs, a startled noise that is swiftly followed by a hiss as it jars his stitches. A small swell of relief rolls through Hannibal at that laugh. It sounds like the Will he's come to know, a sharp break from the hazy distance and exhaustion that's ruled this conversation.

"Is that how we're choosing to remember the... " Will trails off, unable or unwilling to speak directly of the day before. His cheeks are already pink from the fever, hiding any blush.

"Your illness began well before the emotional distress of yesterday," Hannibal says, petting back Will's sodden curls, then cupping the back of his skull lightly to maintain their eye contact. "I suspect, in fact, that it's a response to your increasingly frequent use of the Mark. I assume you used a double to subdue Abel Gideon, as you did with me?"

The grimace is answer enough, but Will mutters, "Yes."

"The Marks are powerful, but not without physical cost," Hannibal says. While Will's body seems to respond to Mark overuse with fevers, his responds by dampening his appetite to nearly nothing; used too often, it would allow him, *encourage* him, to starve to death in truth. It's truly exhausting to combat the side effects of using the Mark's power, and it takes most of his considerable willpower to stay awake, to stand up, to care for Will. Hannibal has long since learned his body's limits. "I must advise against you creating any doubles until you're fully recovered, to allow your body and mind time to heal."

Will wets his lips. "Probably for the best. I can't promise my doubles won't — act on impulse, near you."

"And that is not a promise I expect of you. I can handle the doubles and their impulses."

Will breathes so distractedly, so easily, except for tiny hitches as his lungs accommodate the line of sutures in his side. Hannibal drops a look down at the tray in Will's lap. "Another cup of tea, I think."

"Going to make sure I drink it again?" Will asks, voice thick with — something.

"Yes," he says and stands. "Do you think you can manage the bread first?"

Will eyes it, then shakes his head. Hannibal dips his head in acknowledgement and takes Will's tray, leaving him to his own devices for as long as it takes him to brew another cup of willow bark tisane.

For the first time in a very long while, a veil of uncertainty has draped itself over his immediate future. For years, his life has been patients and dinner parties and the careful partitioning of his bloody art from the rest of his daily routine —*excepting, perhaps, the dinner parties, a rare sort of crossover that happened when a feast presented itself; Will had been entirely right in that estimation; part of it is simply knowing what his guests do not, his own private little joke.*

It's a complicated dance of spinning plates that has always required keen attention to keep aloft. And then Will Graham had come in like a storm, an act of the divine. He hasn't smashed any plates so much as added more for Hannibal to juggle. A delight, a challenge.

—how many of them would he let smash to the ground to keep one, just the one—

When he gets back into the room, fresh teacup in hand, he finds Will gazing blankly at the far wall.

—it reminds him viciously, painfully of the Unnamed, crooning to him about shattering and resentment and it's easy to think about Jack Crawford and Abel Gideon and anyone else who has propped Will up at the edge of the cliff and watched him teeter—

"Will," he says, and half expects no response at all.

But Will blinks and looks back at him. The glassiness of fever has faded somewhat with food and medicine, but the pain and fear from the night before has crept back in its place. He hopes that both fade when Will eventually comes out the other side of all this.

"You are safe here. And wanted," Hannibal says, approaching slowly, unsure of how close Will's threads of calm are to snapping. Perhaps he should have tied him back down before he left, just in case, though the room holds no suitable weapons. He sets the cup on the bedside table. "No more surprises or deceptions. As we agreed."

It's a risk, bringing up the encounter in the hall *—he still has a scab on his throat from the scissors; he wants to keep it.* And Will does flinch, but he doesn't pull away.

"I remember," he says, slowly. He reaches out, a deliberate effort, and touches Hannibal's hand. "I just — I don't trust myself. And you're right not to trust me."

It could be a trick, this seemingly pointed echo of what the Unnamed had said with his lips. Will, awake, saying what he thinks Hannibal wants to hear. But it feels raw, as painful as an exposed nerve.

—he wants to trust Will anyway—

Hannibal is expecting Will to lie and so he is looking for it, carefully calibrating sensors to sort through wheat and chaff. He knows, then, that the easiest way to lie is to tell the truth, but not all of it.

—Will Graham lies with an honest mouth and all he can do is believe it's all true, because he wants it to be—

"I believe in the best of you, Will. Even when you can't," Hannibal says. He helps Will sit back up against the headboard again. "I don't doubt that part of your confusion is also due to your fever, which will pass with treatment and time."

He presses the cup into Will's hands.

“But in which direction?” Will murmurs, as if to himself. He takes a steadying breath before knocking the tea back in one go. His eyes stay on Hannibal the whole time.

Hannibal takes the cup back before he answers, “Towards a clearer understanding of yourself.”

Later, after Will has slipped under the hold of the drugs once again, Hannibal slides another dose of morphine into his arm. This time, he adjusts the bindings to leave room on the other side of the bed. It’s well on the way to full morning, but he’d only slept in thirty minute handfuls throughout the night —*expecting the return of the Unnamed.* So he heads quickly upstairs to change into bedclothes of his own. He figures he has an hour or so before Jack arrives. Two, if he’s lucky.

He slips back into the guest room, draws the curtains over the window, and lays down on the other side of the bed. Everything smells of fever and Will and Hannibal watches, simply watches, before the pull of sleep is too difficult to ignore.

Will dreams of a forest.

Snow blankets the ground, bright and unmarked, and the towering trees are little more than silhouettes in the moonlight. Around him, the clearing is silent in the strange way forests are in the dark, a low murmur of plants shifting and night birds calling and ever-restless insects whispering to one another. There were larger animals here, once, but they’ve all fled.

They know what he is. They know something he doesn’t.

He shifts his jaw against the boiled leather mask covering the lower half of his face. He’s bound to something hard and flat, ropes lashed to every limb and across his neck. The dining room table, his mind supplies. Hannibal’s table. Just like Gideon, he is naked and splayed — an offering.

To what, he doesn’t remember. But he knows he tied himself to this table, this altar. He knows he strapped the muzzle on, too, because he cannot trust his sharpened teeth.

And he knows that he is waiting.

He’s afraid but eager. He’s here as — not a sacrifice. There is a difference between an offering and a sacrifice.

But he doesn’t know that he’ll survive the night, and that is its own thrill.

There is a beast inside him. The muzzle and the bonds restrain it, keep him from consuming himself. Let free, he would tear his own heart from his chest. His claws are sharp and ready. His feet are flayed up to the ankles and the skin of his hands peeled back to his wrists, exposing coal-black ribbons of muscle streaked with brass-bright veins.

The night is cold, and the breeze that ghosts over his flesh draws a whine from his trapped mouth, somewhere between pain and longing. An animal sound.

And in answer, footsteps quietly crunch toward him in the snow.

The thing he's been waiting for.

He can't see it, but he can smell it. Sharp and acrid. It should be unpleasant, the metallic scent of raw meat, but it makes his mouth water. He rolls his head against the table, jerking against his bonds, trying to get a single glimpse.

There — the shadow of antlers. Something moving, sinuous and unearthly. Watching. Waiting. Will's body shudders, arches up, and the ropes creak but don't give. It was hard to bind himself so that he couldn't undo it, and yet he managed.

How? How did he get so tangled up?

Something burns in his chest, calling in a blackened, silent tongue, and he wants to claw it out. Another reason he's tied down — that can't be allowed to happen, either.

The beast approaching has it too, that burning thing, lodged in the hollow of its throat. Will can feel it as the creature approaches, revealing itself to be a shadow, a starving man stretched to inhuman proportions. Each rib is distinct beneath its darkened flesh, even in the low light, as it crosses the arcs of Will's bloody, shed teeth that ring the altar. Whole mouthfuls of them, spat from the high top of the table and scattered on the ground like falling stars as he fought to get the muzzle on himself.

The beast reaches the table and draws its tongue up the center of Will's bared, straining neck.

Will pants, breath condensing in the confines of the mask. His teeth ache; he wants to bite. Wants the emaciated, long-limbed nightmare above him to loose the straps holding the muzzle in place.

He thinks the monster might, if he asks prettily enough.

Will whines again, tipping his head back, and knows even as he does it that there's an equal chance he'll have his throat torn out. And the thought makes him quiver, cock twitching against his belly.

The beast bares needle teeth against Will's throat in a warning, and Will feels blood bead along his skin, feels his pulse begin to pound. His visitor crawls its way down the table, and mouths at the head of Will's cock with the barest scrape of teeth.

There is a part of Will that recoils from the pain, that whispers *no no no no don't trust this, don't accept this,* that wants to twist away.

The rest of him, the part that must remain leashed and gagged, bucks up, chasing contact.

This is why he's here — to be consumed by something that will never stop halfway. That will end the struggle inside of him. The starving creature doesn't second guess. Doesn't panic. Only *is*.

That implacability makes him thrash, heels pressed hard against the wood of the table, back bowing so far his spine protests.

His devourer growls, snaps its teeth in warning, and returns to its task. It mouths along his shaft before swallowing him down. It doesn't gag; nothing it eats is ever wasted.

Every time it pulls back up, it drags its teeth along sensitive skin. Its nails scrape red welts down Will's heaving stomach before, in one smooth motion, it pulls its mouth off his cock and sinks the longest tine of an antler into his belly.

Will screams, pressing away from it. The table at his back keeps him pinned. Opened up. The thing on his chest burns hotter. The pain of it, the rearrangement, makes something in his skull shift, and then Will is remembering, remembering this creature lapping at his wounds, stalking from the dining room, leaving him, leaving —

Hannibal isn't leaving him now.

Hannibal.

But knowing that this is Hannibal and finally understanding this is a dream make the impalement hurt more, and Will sobs, belly flexing as if it can reject this. It can't. It can only tear him more.

He needs to wake up. He can wake up. This tastes like a shared dream from his Mark, this feels like Hannibal walking in the halls of his mind, and he screams *WAKE UP*.

And the dream continues.

The antler pops through his diaphragm.

Will howls and howls, digs weals of table out with his claws, hips bucking, even as other points of Hannibal's antlers sink shallowly into his belly, into the thin spread of muscle over his ribs. Hannibal slaps a hand over Will's left hip and plunges his nails in to hold him still.

The blood leaking down the shuddering line of Will's stomach is ink black.

Hannibal ruts against Will's leg, antlers pushing up and under his breastbone, scraping velvet off as he goes. As Hannibal guts him, Will tries to retreat back to the fog of unknowing. But just as he can't wake up, he can't bury his mind, and his howling becomes begging. He cries Hannibal's name. He struggles.

He wants the pain to end, more than anything. And almost as much, he wants dream logic to cease, to stop making the pain twine with pleasure, because his cock — his cock isn't rock hard anymore, but it's not soft, and sometimes when the antlers drag over particular spots, he feels the phantom memory of Hannibal thrusting into him.

Hannibal shudders and jerks his head. The tine pierces Will's heart.

For a moment, there is peace.

Nothingness.

A kind of death.

And then the knots he tied fall free, at his own touch, at his own desire. Will digs claws into his own skin, and tears himself apart.

Beneath pale skin, his flesh is black and gold, a monster's form for a monstrous lust, and it is so much easier to inhabit, no longer the living horror of the inbetween. He lays shivering on the table, trying to catch his breath, the muzzle smothering him.

And Will is *something.* He is free.

Hannibal tugs his claws and antlers out and surges up to lean over Will's face. He catches the tears still leaking from Will's eyes with the point of his tongue. He still wears his gaunt deathmask as he pulls one of Will's shaking hands to the ridge of his hip, encourages the curl of Will's claws against him. Presses hard enough to draw blood.

Slowly, carefully, Hannibal loosens the muzzle and tosses it from the altar.

Will hisses as the cold air hits his mouth. The pale flesh there is overheated, damp and sloughing away. He snarls, his mouth filled with row upon row of teeth, and tongues at a long scrap of skin from his lips. It comes away easily, and is just as easily swallowed.

He's too exhausted by his transformation to do much more than breathe and, slowly, begin to rut up against Hannibal. He's hard again, fully, and the spines that line his cock scrape against Hannibal's flesh. The shape of him has changed into something vicious, something that won't let go easily.

Hannibal just needs to open himself up first.

He chases Will's mouth, licking away the blood and taking pieces of flesh with him for his trouble. Then he sits back on his knees and swipes two fingers through blood pooling low on Will's stomach, slides his hand between his legs. He watches Will, eyes-half lidded, peaked ribs rising with the sharp noises that escape his mouth every time he rocks his fingers deeper.

Will stares up at the monster that is Hannibal with fervent adoration. The remote calm of that face that he'd seen in Hannibal's dining room is long gone, the beast undeniably wanting. Not just hungry — covetous.

And so is Will. He can't lay still, can't be content to just wait, so he struggles upright and grabs Hannibal by the throat, drags him close to bite at his mouth. The hand still on Hannibal's hip, clutching at the blade of his ilium, pulls down and Will thrusts up. The pointed tip of his cock pushes against Hannibal's fingers, insistent.

Hannibal urges Will's grip on his neck bone-breakingly tight as he presses up all the way onto his kneecaps and slides his fingers out. He slams Will's hips down, ignoring the gnashing growl that bubbles from Will's chest.

He snarls in pain and pleasure as he sinks down onto every prickling inch of Will's cock.

Will wants to buck, but he holds himself still, quivering with the effort. He doesn't look away, and only ghosts his aching teeth over Hannibal's lips. When at last he can feel bones against the meat of his thighs, he releases Hannibal's throat and seizes one antler, the one that had killed him. And he uses that handhold to urge Hannibal up.

The spines of him point one way, like a fishhook, and they dig in as Hannibal rises. They carve out space for Will inside of him, and they refuse to let go entirely. It's painful for him, Will knows, Will can see, but it is *necessary*, this taking. The separation is exquisitely painful for Will as well, even as he's rocked by searing pleasure.

Hannibal snaps at being led.

Will is still weak. Newly reborn and trembling, oversensitive. But he wants with a ferocity that feels like coming home, and he tightens his hold on Hannibal and fucks up into him. Small motions at first, limited by Hannibal's resistance, by his own reflexive desire to avoid the discomfort of pulling out, but the rhythm builds. Each thrust is easier, more pleasure and less pain, the spines providing drag more than true injury, until he's panting against Hannibal's mouth.

Then he drops his head down and closes his teeth over the base of Hannibal's throat, and thrusts hard. Hannibal meets him halfway, grinding down against Will's cock as his hips snap up. He grips the back of Will's neck, all claws.

It would be so easy to kill him. To feast. To drink deep and take everything he wants, but no, no, what Will wants is a *future*.

This, again and again.

Will snarls and bites, but not too hard. Just enough for Hannibal to feel it, to pierce skin and let darkness fill his mouth. He holds on, teeth and spines, and he lets go of the antler, settles both hands now on Hannibal's hips. He guides and takes and *takes* and buries himself so deep inside Hannibal that he thinks he might split him open.

His tongue pushes against Hannibal's throat. His chest sings. His hips begin to stutter.

Nothing is going to make him let go. Will is inside Hannibal and all around him, past, present, and future.

Hannibal comes, concave stomach tightening, grip digging hard enough into Will to break his skin wide open. Will fucks Hannibal through his ecstasy, and the spasming of Hannibal's body tears him over the edge. He seizes Hannibal's face between his clawed hands, sealing their mouths together and keening into him.

Snow begins to fall. Will nuzzles downward, claws scoring Hannibal's flesh as they follow, and as Will laps at the wounds at his throat, the dream dissolves.

Hannibal wakes quietly, blinking away afterimages of snow and antlers sinking into flesh. He is pressed tight up against Will's back, one arm cinched protectively over his injured side.

Daylight slides in around the edges of the curtains, and the room is overwarm. Hannibal's bedclothes are sticky and wet against him, and not only from sweat —*shame isn't an emotion he's intimately acquainted with but this is undoubtedly uncomfortable.* Will's arms are a tangle above his head, fingers lazily worked into Hannibal's hair, and he sighs in his sleep.

When Hannibal begins to carefully extricate himself, Will shifts back against him, seeking contact, an instinct like a grab in the dark. His hands pull gently at the ropes.

"Hannibal," he mumbles, soft and pleasant and unaware.

Hannibal stills him with a firm hand on his hip. He leans forward enough to nuzzle against the tiny curls soaked to the back of Will's neck. He lets his hand drift down to the front of Will's underclothes. Damp, in much the same state as his own.

Hannibal smiles against Will's skin. Even closing his eyes again wouldn't bring back any more snatches of the dream than he's already grasping for —*the scraped-out feeling of being claimed, raw in his guts, raw in his heart.* He smoothes gentling hands down Will's shoulder and side before properly getting up to sort himself out. He comes back to Will after, strips and cleans him with a cool, damp cloth.

And then Hannibal stays, knelt down at the side of the bed, thinking over that dream that was unlike anything he's ever conceived of before, thinking only *mine—no, not just that; wondering over Will's fever, over the Unnamed's whispered warning about trust.*

Hannibal peels one of Will's eyelids open, just enough to confirm. Blue, only blue.

Will rolls in his bonds and Hannibal lets him go, lingering only to kiss him. Will's mouth barely opens under his, fever-hot. It's enough.

It's late morning and Hannibal knows he should check on Gideon's body, should let his patients know he won't be making rounds today, should get up properly and wait for Jack to come calling. He should, but he still needs sleep. So, he slides back into bed beside Will and sinks back down, half-wishing to dream.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Hannibal manages to eke out a few more moments with a hand resting on the bedroom door. "If he asks you to leave, I will enforce that. As his physician."

Jack holds up his hands. "I can't promise I can honor that."

"Well," Hannibal says, "as long as we know where we stand."

--

Jack sees too much. Hannibal and Will take care of the evidence.

It's early afternoon when Hannibal wakes again.

Even though he's naked and pressed too close to a sweltering, sweating Will Graham, he feels well-rested. Content. He knows he needs to get up, needs to write his condolences to the patients whose appointments he has long since slept through. Needs to make arrangements for one of his colleagues at the city hospital to cover him on such short notice. Needs to be ready for Jack Crawford's inevitable arrival, already delayed for longer than Hannibal thought likely. But instead he lets himself linger in bed awhile, listening to Will's shallow breathing, pained and raspy through his injured nose.

Today, he only has one patient.

After stealing upstairs to dress, Hannibal returns to the guest bedroom to untie Will and pack away the bindings. Will seems cooler to the touch, fever dampening, and the swelling around his nose has reduced dramatically, bruises already lightening to blue-green —*far too quickly for normal healing; the Mark passively accelerating recovery just as it accelerates speed and strength.* He administers another dose of morphine when Will begins to murmur his discomfort and pulls the bedclothes and blanket up around him.

Downstairs, Hannibal retrieves the first round of the day's letters pushed through the mail slot, pens his apologies and his colleague requests to leave for the early-evening post collection. After, he puts a kettle on and begins to gather food from the larder, something easy for Will to get a few mouthfuls down.

Before he can empty the whistling kettle over the eggs intended for soft-boiling, someone knocks on the door. Pounds on the door, more accurately, with barely a pause in between sets.

Hannibal only knows one person who knocks with such force.

He goes to answer the door. As expected, Jack stands on the stoop, fist poised to keep at his frame-shuddering knocking and face set in a hard expression in the shadow of his hat.

“Jack,” Hannibal says, as surprised as he can make himself sound —*he knew Jack would arrive eventually*. “What can I do for you?”

Jack doesn’t waste a moment on pleasantries but a flicker of relief crosses his face. It’s gone as quickly as it appears. “Please tell me Will is with you.”

“He is.” Hannibal shifts into the space between the door and its frame. He’s always been at least somewhat prepared for the inevitability of Jack Crawford trying to knock down his door —*he just never imagined it would be on someone else’s account*. “Have you apprehended Abel Gideon?”

“Not yet,” Jack says, barely-leashed anger in his words. He huffs a little laugh, but there’s no amusement in it. “I came by this morning, after Will didn’t answer his door. No answer from you, either. I figured you were out on your rounds. Until I get a letter from my wife that you missed her appointment without sending a message ahead. For someone who makes such a big deal about common courtesy, that seemed shockingly rude. Too shocking, in fact. So you know what I thought? I thought Gideon had gotten to the both of you.”

“You have every right to be upset with me, Jack,” Hannibal begins. “That was thoughtless —”

“You’re damn right it was thoughtless,” Jack snaps, gesturing at the house, at him. “I was halfway to putting together a search party to track down Will, in the vain hope that he was still alive. And yet, here you are. *Both* of you.”

Hannibal lets out a small sigh, tries to look at least slightly penitent. “It’s more complicated than that, Jack.”

“It better be. Otherwise I can’t come up with any explanation other than that you two think it's fun to ignore my attempts to contact you when we’ve got a killer on the loose. *Two*, if you count the Ripper.”

It takes Hannibal only a short moment to put an alibi together —*something drawn from existing truths, but rearranged; a simple story for Will to use as a shield should he be lucid enough to use it.*

“I hesitate telling you this as it borders on a violation of the strict confidentiality I keep with my patients,” he says. “But as you are aware, Will has been ill, sometimes disoriented. Yesterday was one of those times. He was attacked near his home.”

Jack’s expression softens slightly, weary more than angry. He doesn’t respond right away, but scrapes a hand over his face. “Not unusual in his neighborhood. And disoriented, he would’ve been an easy target.” A muscle in his jaw jumps. “I knew I should’ve kept an officer on him. But he was so sure Gideon would be at that damn lighthouse, I didn’t think...did he say who it was? Did he see anything?”

Hannibal frowns. “I didn’t ask. He was and still is in the grips of a rather serious fever. His grasp on lucidity is rather tenuous.”

Even as genuine worry worms its way into Jack’s expression, his voice never loses its healthy dose of skepticism. “He came to you?”

Hannibal blinks at him, surprised. In some strange way, Will feels like a part of him, a lobe of his own lung, present every time he moves and breathes and just as difficult to part with. Not that he could trot that particular explanation out in this circumstance, but Jack Crawford is not an unintelligent or unobservant man.

In the end, Hannibal settles on, “He was injured. And, officially or not, I am his doctor.”

“You’re more than that,” Jack corrects. “How bad is he hurt?”

“Somewhat significantly. His attacker had a knife.” He doesn’t move even as Jack crowds the door, expecting to be admitted. “I’m afraid I can’t let you in. He’s sleeping and on a significant dose of morphine.”

“I’m not going to ask again, Dr. Lecter.” Jack braces a hand on the door, a warning. “At the very least, I need to see that he’s alright. And take his statement, if that’s something he wants. But that’s not up to *you.* ”

Hannibal knows a snake’s warning stripes when he sees them. There’s no time to explain, to prepare stories with Will or hide anything away *—he keeps a clean kitchen but Will is a living, breathing crime scene all unto himself.*

There’s no telling how Will is going to react. And there’s no sense in coming to blows with Jack Crawford over this.

He shifts just out of the way enough to let Jack in. Jack doesn’t remove his coat or his hat, merely looks around and takes in the quiet stillness of the house.

His brows pinch. “Where are your staff, doctor?”

“I only hire extra hands when I need them,” Hannibal corrects. He can almost see Jack adjust to this new piece of information, file it away carefully, stand up a little straighter. He heads for the stairs and says, “He’s up here. Follow me, if you would.”

With Jack right behind him, Hannibal can’t even give any Will more warning than the soft knock.

He manages to eke out a few more moments with a hand resting on the door. “If he asks you to leave, I will enforce that. As his physician.”

Jack holds up his hands. “I can’t promise I can honor that.”

“Well,” Hannibal says, “as long as we know where we stand.”

He opens the door.

Will stares at the both of them, frozen upright in the bed. His blanket puddles in his lap.

The Mark is distinct and unmissable on his chest.

This isn't happening. He's only been awake for five minutes at most. Maybe he never woke up at all. This could be a fever dream, some nightmare from the drugs fogging his mind. Crawford can't be here. Hannibal wouldn't have let him in. Hannibal wouldn't be letting this happen (but Hannibal is not infallible; Will knows that very well, as well as he knows the feeling of Hannibal's viscera beneath his fingers).

His thoughts refuse to run in straight lines, but he manages to sit up straighter, tries to pull together some shreds of dignity. His sutured side protests. His wrists are still pink, though not terribly chafed. No thrashing in his sleep then. But he remembers —

Something. Maybe a dream. A forest. Bitter cold, then searing heat.

"Jack," he rasps, the first name a plea, his voice kludgy from his swollen nose and sleep-thickened throat.

Jack stares back, looking like he wants to wake up from an awful dream himself.

Will doesn't know what to say next. He looks to Hannibal, desperate for him to do something. To fix this. But Hannibal goes to Jack instead and puts a hand on his shoulder, saying, "Jack, before you do something rash, I urge you to — "

"With all due respect, Doctor, I don't want to hear another word from you," Jack growls at him and then swivels his attention back to Will. "You, start talking. Now. How long have you had — " His gaze cuts away from Will's face, down to the Mark. "How long have you been lying to me?

Will flinches as if struck. "Jack, I can explain —"

"Can you? You can explain why you decided to put me, the team, all of us at risk?" He's nearer to shouting now but he still doesn't reach for his gun. "Best case scenario, we get dragged in for questioning as your associates; worst case, we end up infected with your madness, hurting the very people we're trying to protect. So I'm going to ask you again: how long have you been a heretic, Will?"

Heretic. The word burns through him, and he sees Inquisitors' masks and heavy shackles and too many blood-drenched crime scenes that called out, futilely, to the Unnamed. "You — you honestly think I chose this?" The laugh that tears from his throat is sharp-edged. "You think I *chose* to be impaled by a — a feathered stag? Chose to wake up down by the docks with this — this — "

His hand clutches at his chest, at the Mark, and it hums beneath his fingertips. His throat tightens. He wants to bite back but he can barely breathe, let alone force any words out.

“*Jack*, look at him. Listen to what he’s saying,” Hannibal implores, low, tightening his grip on Jack’s shoulder just a fraction. But Jack isn’t looking away from Will. “He’s hardly in a fit state for answering questions.”

Will’s chest catches, painfully. Hannibal is right. Jack needs to leave. But —

“Yes I can see that.” Finally, Jack rounds on Hannibal and brushes the grip off easily. “You’ve been with him for *days,* doctor. So you’ve been, what, helping to cover it up?”

Hannibal doesn’t even blink. “Yes. ”

Jack paces, but he doesn’t make for the door. “I told you that you couldn’t be objective about him,” he snaps.

“The objective thing to do would be to arrest us and hail the Inquisitors. I don’t see you making a run for it.” Hannibal takes a step closer to him as he paces. “It’s so rare to be able to observe those with this...condition. To see how their deterioration progresses and if it can be prevented. A doctor has to weigh the ultimate benefit of scientific study. I weighed it and I found it worthwhile.”

Will’s stomach twists. Bile rises in his throat. Hannibal’s voice hasn’t gone cold, no, that would be easier to bear. Instead, it’s turned fervent.

But not in Will’s direction.

He stares at Hannibal instead, pleading, needing to know that this is only a ruse. That isn't why Hannibal has stayed by him. He knows it has to be a ruse, knows it as well as he knows the Mark beneath Hannibal’s collar.

But they can’t risk them both being exposed, now can they? And if one of them has to be sacrificed to protect the other...

A flicker of disgust passes over Jack’s thunderous brow. “I don’t give a damn about scientific study. What I need to know is if this happened before or after he started shooting people under my watch. Did he tell you how many people he’s managed to kill?” After a moment of eyeing Hannibal harshly, Jack wheels back to the bed. “Before or after Hobbs? Answer me, Will.”

“*After*,” Will says, clutching the blanket and leaning closer. “I’m not — I’m not deteriorating! Or if I am, it started a long time before this.”

The fear and anger in him is cutting through the haze of drugs in his system, flaying his skin. He wants to lash out, wants to fight.

He’s only distantly aware of the shadows gathering by the doorway.

“The Mark appeared just after Buddish,” he says, trying to control his voice. “I swear, Jack.”

Crawford is going to know he didn’t seclude himself for another week after that. But that’s the truth; Will can’t fix that.

Jack turns back to Hannibal. “Could he be lying?”

“The fever alters his gauge of reality,” Hannibal replies, then tilts his head. “But only enough that it gives him no reason to lie. In this moment, his body and his mind are fighting his illness. That takes priority over more complex self-preservations.”

Jack lets out a long breath and shakes his head. “Out of everything that I thought could be going on...I didn’t see *this*. He hasn’t become any more violent, but he’s been acting different.”

“Not different,” he says. “Afraid. He’s afraid now.”

“I’m right here,” Will spits, fear transmuting into anger in an instant. “I can hear you!”

But he can’t argue. Can he? It feels dangerous to argue, but it feels so imperative that he tells the truth.

He is burning, and he thinks he might immolate them all.

The shadows at the door coalesce into the shape of a man with sharp teeth and taloned hands. Will doesn’t see it; all he sees is Jack, staring at him. Hannibal, regarding him with — disappointment? Warning? He doesn’t look long enough to see.

“I tried to avoid you, Jack!” he says, to fill the silence. His voice breaks, turns thin and high. “As soon as I knew I was a danger, I — I hid myself, didn’t you notice? You didn’t let me stay away.”

Jack shakes his head, and Will has no idea whether Jack believes him or not.

Please believe me.

“He’s right, Jack,” Hannibal says, softly. “And I warned you about his illness. About pushing him. And you pushed anyway. You said you trusted him to always come back to being himself. Here and now is where you prove that trust. Or don’t.”

With that, he moves to Will’s side.

Will looks at him, beseeching, grateful. His mouth moves, shapes, “*Don’t lie to me*,” without breath. His eyes shine with overwhelmed tears.

In the doorway, the double dissipates.

“I’m trying,” Will whispers, gaze never leaving Hannibal. “To understand it. To control it. I’ll get there.”

I’m scared.

“I know, Will,” Hannibal says, so gently, as he crouches beside the bed. He pushes Will’s fringe back to lie a soothing hand on his forehead. “You will get there.”

Will drinks in the trust and care in his eyes. He convinces himself it's genuine. As if from far away, Will hears Jack speak. Halting and hesitant.

"Will. Your...problem. Has it affected your imagination?"

He closes his eyes and says, "It's helped, Jack. It's how I understood Georgia Madchen. But it's also why I needed Dr. Lecter, after. It — heightens it. Everything."

Tears burn, but he holds them back. His chest hitches as he fights at the edge of hyperventilation. He can do this. He can defend himself. He can make sure he isn't taken away.

(But what if he is? What if he lets them take him, lets the nightmare end? It would be better for everybody.)

(Except he'd lose Hannibal.)

"That — " Jack seems to struggle for words. " — what happened at the Madchen scene. Is that going to keep happening?"

"I don't think anyone can say for certain," Hannibal answers. He draws his hand down to cup Will's cheek for a moment before pulling back. Will comes very close to chasing the touch, unable to remember for a moment why he shouldn't. He's had a refuge so rarely in his life that, with it so close at hand, he craves it. "Not without sending him back out into the field. But there is reason to hope that his condition can be managed; he is still the Will Graham you've always known, and the Inquisitor at the asylum gave no indication that they could sense anything amiss."

Jack crosses his arms over his chest, chin tucked down as he considers. Finally, he slides his gaze back to Will and asks, "How long do you think it'll take to get back on your feet?"

Will looks at him for a moment, then away.

"Not long," he says. "Just need to — to wait out the fever. Something like the Madchen scene*,* there were external factors."

"Good. Because you were right about Gideon, but we missed him at the lighthouse," Jack says. "He left behind a body, though."

Will frowns. "No, he didn't," he says, forcefully, certain he's right. Why is he right? Something — something from before, he can almost grasp it, but it doesn't *matter,* he knows he's right — "That was the Ripper, Jack."

Jack scowls. "Will — "

"Show me — show me the scene drawings, you brought them, right? Let me see them — "

But Hannibal cuts him off. "You are in no state to work right now, Will," he says. And then Will remembers *why* he knows, remembers breakfast, and Hannibal calmly telling him that he'd left Jack a distraction, and his stomach lurches.

Hannibal is trying to keep him safe.

Hannibal should be trying to keep everybody else safe *from him*. But of course he isn't, because he's the Ripper. He's the Ripper, and Jack is *right there*.

Will has to say something.

But he can't say it, can't say *Jack, Hannibal is the Ripper*, because to say that means losing him. He can offer other truths, though, enough to come close, enough for Jack to make his own connections. He struggles up, sitting forward, gasping for air. The Mark is stark on his skin, and his eyes are bright as he says, almost shouts, "Gideon is *dead,* Jack. I killed him, gave him to the Ripper — "

Hannibal's hand brushes against his temple, and speech ceases abruptly.

It's not a lack of breath; it's a lack of words. He doesn't *remember* words. Any words. A high whine of panic builds in his throat, and it's only then that he feels it: the heated pressure of Hannibal's consciousness growing into his own.

On the outside, there is nothing for Jack to see, merely Will's gaze going unfocused and the lines of his body relaxing minutely. Inside, he is on fire. Fear and guilt and anger explode through a mind cooking in its braincase. Hannibal doesn't latch deep into musculature or spinal and peripheral nerves but Will's roiling pain chases him all the same. So does the incinerating scorch of the Mark that senses two people with agency in a single body.

Hannibal skirts up the medulla and pons and dives for the temporal lobes. One scrambling, firing impulse is all it takes.

He's vaguely aware of Will shuddering under his touch, a desperate sob cutting short as Will shakes. Hannibal slithers out of Will and immediately brings hands up to brace his head and ensure the stability of his airway. Jack crosses the room quickly and gets down beside the bed as Hannibal peels one of Will's eyes carefully open —*white all the way up.*

Jack's hand is on the revolver at his waist. "Doctor?"

"No need for that. This is hardly heretical magic," Hannibal tells him, steadying Will through the convulsions. "He's having a mild seizure. Stress from your unexpected arrival combined with the fever is providing a shock to his system severe enough that his body can't cope."

"You're certain of that?" Jack's anger is a cold one and Hannibal can feel it shudder off of him in waves. His hand doesn't leave the gun.

"I'm less familiar with fits of Marked power, but I have seen plenty of seizures." As soon as Will's muscles relax, leaving him quieted but far from aware, Hannibal eases Will back against the headboard. Only when he's protected Will's airway and made sure to cover him enough to preserve his modesty, Hannibal turns to Jack and says, "It will be several minutes before he comes out of this and far more for him to regain any coherence."

He gets to his feet. The tense quiet is broken only by Will's labored breathing. Finally, Jack moves his fingers off the revolver.

"What did he mean?" he asks, voice sharp. "Killing Gideon and giving him to the Ripper?"

"Will was the one who disabused Gideon of the notion that he was someone else. I could see how he would blame himself if Gideon decides to go looking for the Ripper. That is as good as tying the noose. Perhaps even feels like killing him," Hannibal suggests. "Will's fever is severe enough that combined with the morphine, he may not have a steady grip on what is real."

Jack points at him. "You said he had no reason to lie."

"That isn't lying, Jack. It's an inability to distinguish the inner world from the outer one."

The inspector simply shakes his head, undeterred. "You said you didn't ask who attacked him. What if it *was* Gideon?" He gestures to Will's body. "Those bruises on his hands — he hurt whoever attacked him. Badly, maybe badly enough to kill."

"It's possible," Hannibal says. "But do you believe he could, given his present state?"

Jack returns his gaze to Will, fixed on the blanket under which the Mark lies dark and indelible on Will's chest. "I don't know what I believe. When I saw him yesterday, he was coherent. And he was right, about the lighthouse; he just wasn't fast enough. To think he could go from that to an invalid in less than twenty-four hours..."

Hannibal lets him look for several moments longer before saying, "I think it would be best if we left Will to rest. Let me see you out."

Jack gives one last look at Will, mouth pressing into a thin line, before Hannibal politely escorts him out of the guestroom. They head downstairs and when they reach the foyer, Hannibal turns to ask after the crime scene illustrations. It will set Jack at ease, for Hannibal to ask after what Will so earnestly wanted, and he is somewhat fond of whoever it is who captures crimes in ink and watercolor for the police department *—they have a steady hand and an eye for exposing layers of cruelty.*

His request is derailed by Jack smashing a fist into his jaw.

Hannibal's head snaps to the side, a flashbang of sensation that sends his world spinning. He staggers back, more startled than anything else *—do not hurt Jack Crawford.* Jack grabs him by the shoulders and smashes a knee into his stomach. Hannibal lets out a dull noise of pain and surprise and barely has his arm up to deflect when Jack throws him to the ground with all his strength.

His back smacks against the wood, all of the air punched from his lungs. Hannibal forces his vision to clear.

Jack towers over him and says, evenly, "Listen to me, Hannibal, because I'm only going to say this once. *You* are my friend. Bella's friend. But as a part of my team, *Will* is my charge.

My responsibility. You're going to stop whatever it is you're doing with him. If I'd known you'd been taking advantage of him while he was afraid of himself, when he thought the rest of us would blindly turn him in, I'd have — "

He breaks off with a drawn out breath. Hannibal swallows and struggles for air, making his face as impassive as he can manage. But before he can answer Jack steps forward, resting his boot hard on Hannibal's chest.

Jack leans in and Hannibal feels his ribs groan. "If I had it my way, he'd be far away from you. But his... *condition* means I can't send him anywhere but my own home, and I can't put Bella at risk like that."

"No — " Hannibal manages. " — you can't."

"I'm going to be keeping an eye on you, Hannibal." The boot presses down hard and Hannibal wheezes, the world still twisting lazily around him. "And the first person Will is going to see when he makes a full recovery is going to be me. Understood?"

Hannibal nods and tries not let his lip pull up in a snarl —*this is not a bridge to burn; but that doesn't mean he can't lay some fuel.* "Physicians can have divided loyalties. We have to protect our patients from becoming victims of the pressures we face to help them. Mind how much pressure you're putting on Will."

Jack's face goes stony and he shoves his foot roughly down on Hannibal's chest before letting him go. Hannibal sits up, gets a knee under himself, waiting for the inevitable click of the front door opening and shutting.

Instead Jack's knuckles crack across his face again. The world goes white. Hannibal tastes blood.

It only takes moments for the Mark to catch up, to burn with cold fury and beg to be used. Hannibal merely waits for his head to clear and when it does, he looks up to see Jack smooth the front of his coat and pull a small leather notebook from his pocket.

"The illustrations," he says and deposits it onto the low table underneath the hat rack.

Jack doesn't look back when he wrenches the door open and slams it shut behind him.

Will comes back to himself in fits and starts.

It isn't linear. His fingers work, and then they don't. His thoughts are orderly, and then he's half asleep again. He is in pain, and then he isn't.

(No; he's always in pain. He just isn't always aware of it.)

At some point, he drags himself from the bed. It's very important; he has to follow Jack. Jack needs to know...something.

No, that's not right. That's a secret. Jack isn't supposed to know.

His head spins, and he staggers to the wall. Cheek pressed to the plaster, he closes his eyes and breathes hard. His side aches. It's wet, in places. The word *sutures* drifts through his mind, unattached, meaningless.

There's something very wrong, but he doesn't remember what.

"My name is Will Graham," he mumbles. "It's — it's — the afternoon?"

He opens his eyes. Sees daylight. Closes them again. *Afternoon* is as accurate as anything.

"I'm in Hannibal Lecter's house, and — "

Things shiver, disintegrate, reconstitute.

"And I don't want to leave this house alive," he whispers.

The wall is the only thing keeping him from spinning apart, and he clings to it. Feels footsteps through it. Footsteps, coming nearer, and he doesn't have the energy to flee, even though he knows he should. He just can't remember why.

The door opens. Hannibal comes to him in an instant, propping him up, gentle yet inexorable. His face swims into view. It's wrong, somehow. Reddened in places. His hair is disheveled. His lower lip is cut, split at the edge. He looks *concerned*.

"Will," he says, soft and level, as level as the wall beneath Will's cheek, "you've had a seizure. Can you hear me?"

Will twitches, but doesn't fight. He's too exhausted, and a distant part of him knows that he needs to be smart, if he's going to fight Hannibal with any chance of winning.

(He'll have to be smart, if he's going to fight Hannibal with any chance of dying.)

His eyes flutter open, and he looks up at Hannibal, hazily.

"Jack," he says, his voice still slurred. He doesn't know what he's asking. But it's important. "Does he — what — "

"It seems there are elements of the law Jack Crawford is willing to overlook because it suits him. A troubling quality, perhaps, but it seems he is more protective of you than I realized," Hannibal says and eases him to his feet, leads him back in the direction of the bed. "I think you've torn some of your sutures."

Hannibal falls quiet, expression considering. He's turning something over, and Will can't guess at what it might be. His thoughts are still too tangled, too ragged, but Hannibal looks… sad. Regretful. Pitying, perhaps.

Will thinks, suddenly, and with a sinking certainty, that Hannibal is about to lie.

And then he says, "I caused your seizure, Will."

Will stares.

It's not the shock of the truth, but of the confession, that cuts through some of the fog, reorganizes the chaos in his skull. It makes him feel, inexplicably, safer. Hannibal could have blamed the fever, could have blamed the double Will thinks he might have tried to conjure, but he does no such thing.

Hannibal isn't lying to him. Will is there beside him, behind the veil.

"I felt you," he whispers. He leans closer to him, lifts a hand to trace over Hannibal's cheekbone. It's hot, under his touch. "You — stopped me."

Stopped him from telling Jack — what had he been about to tell Jack?

"Not soon enough," Hannibal says. "You told him you killed Abel Gideon. I think you had half a mind to tell him about the Ripper as well. I don't know how well I managed to convince Jack that it wasn't to be believed."

Hannibal catches his fingers, laces them with his own.

"I almost told him about you?" Will asks, and he knows it's true. He came very close. It was important.

But it's also important that Jack doesn't know.

Will shudders, torn in two incompatible directions. He comes close enough to drop his fevered brow against Hannibal's shoulder, to clutch at his shirt with his free hand.

"He would have taken you," Will says, slowly. "Or killed you. Or tried to."

Hannibal sets a hand on the back of Will's head, holds him closer, and rests his cheek against Will's hair.

"He would've," he agrees quietly. "Did you want him to?"

Will keeps trembling. He nuzzles at Hannibal's throat.

"Yes," he whispers, then just as quickly, "No. I don't — both? It felt — it felt necessary." He takes a hitching breath, closes his eyes, tries to think. "I work for him. He needs me to catch the Ripper. Everything I am means I need to stop you. But he doesn't know me, not like you know me, and I — I — "

A memory crests over him, painful and indistinct and perfect. Ice, on his skin. The heat of Hannibal above him. Their bodies, inseparable, their hunger joined. The echo of feeling is so pale, compared to the reality he can't quite reach, but it is beautiful.

"I love you," he sighs. His body eases in relief. "Don't want to lose you. But I can't keep you, can I? Not like this."

Will's words ring through his head.

— they make him ache and ache beyond sense or measure —

Hannibal strokes fingers through Will's hair and it's the first time he lets himself think it in concrete terms *:* he's holding his most precious things in his hands, Will and this knowledge and this moment.

In his life, there is love and there is hunger and somewhere along the way, these have tangled, snarled into each other in knots. In his estimation, love is a deity that either pays one a visit or doesn't. Hannibal and Will have already been visited by one deity, a force of its own. Will is Marked and he is *marked* and he wears the latter because it was a choice, because it was laid by Hannibal.

It's a very long time before Hannibal can answer. He draws their laced fingers to Will's belly, to the scabbed and scarring bites.

"You can keep me. Just like this."

Will sucks in a breath through his teeth and confesses, "I can't lie to Jack. Not always. Not even when I'm better. You can't ask that of me. I can't — I can't do what you do." He tilts his head, kisses Hannibal's throat, then scrapes at it with his teeth, clumsy but determined. "I feel like I'm being — unraveled. Can't hold on to all the threads. Never know which ones I'm going to grab."

"Let me hold them, Will," Hannibal says, low, "and you can grab as you like."

Will doesn't accept that or deny it. He simply holds on.

It takes longer than it should, but Hannibal eventually maneuvers Will back to the bed. It would have been easier to carry him there, but he doesn't want to scrub blood out of yet another shirt *—and he has no desire to separate Will's mouth from his skin.*

When he goes to check the stitches, he finds Will hasn't slipped them at all. Fragile new skin, already growing translucent over the edges of the stitches many days too early, has split and bled. Hannibal merely cleans him off and fetches another tab of chloral hydrate.

This time, it's easy. Hannibal's fingers meet no resistance as they push the medicine past Will's lips and settle it onto his tongue.

"We are alike but we are not the same," he says as Will swallows the pill and settles back against his pillows. "Leave lying to Jack to me. When that time comes, there will be evidence and someone to be the Ripper "

"Nobody else could ever be the Ripper," Will says, shaking his head. "Could only ever be you."

"Jack is nowhere near as perceptive as you are," Hannibal soothes. "Trust in me, Will."

Will considers this, body easing towards lassitude once more. One of his hands plucks at the coverlet and his eyes fall half-closed. “Last night...last night, I dreamed of a forest. And of you, and me. Do you remember? You were — ” His lips quirk. “The midwife of nightmares. Among other things.”

Hannibal does remember, bits and pieces —*a forest and the snow, ground rotting under his feet, Will under him but not around him, no, Will had been inside him, a rending, tearing feeling that held him tight.*

He thinks he wants to feel that in reality, someday.

“I remember.”

Will’s head lolls back, his eyes fully closing as he murmurs, “And then I never let you go.”

Hannibal sits at the edge of the bed and watches as Will eases back into sleep. He sits and watches and wonders at a life, at a future, because the only future he can imagine carving out for himself has Will Graham in it, the only constant in its unpredictability. He brushes the brand of chaos at his throat.

He leans over Will and sets a kiss in the curls just above his ear. He says it quiet, barely audible, in his native tongue because that is as honest as he knows how to be.

I am in love with you.

He doesn’t lock the door when he leaves.

Will sleeps through the rest of the afternoon.

He allows himself to be fed in the early evening, broth and tea, but he isn’t really awake. The medication and the after-effects of his seizure mix with the ongoing ravages of his fever to keep him under, submerged in a cool lake, lying along the bottom of a river. It’s peaceful there, if muffled.

He does manage, with aid, to go to the washroom to relieve himself. He remembers it, blearily. But then it’s back into the river. He goes willingly.

The next time Will wakes, it’s to an empty room once more. Night has fallen. He’s disoriented, mind still shimmering with fever. He knows this room, but he’s not tied down, and the door stands open.

He’s no longer naked, instead wearing a long nightgown. It has elegant tatted lace along the neckline, and is soft, as if it’s been laundered many times. It would fall to the floor on a woman. On him, it reaches his calves. The sleeves are a little too short.

He doesn’t recognize any of it. Still asleep, he realizes. He’s dreaming.

Will rises from the bed. His side aches. The cut on his cheek throbs. His nose is still swollen, though less so now. It’s a very realistic dream, all told; no towering trees, no lighthouse on

the horizon. Just a room, and a hallway, and the faint glimmer of a light beyond.

“Hannibal?” he calls after staring at the light for a few long minutes, swaying slightly on his feet.

No answer reaches him. He steps out into the hall. The light is by the stairs. He follows it.

The proportions of the house have changed.

The hallway is too long. The stairs, hard to manage. There is a light waiting for him down below. His feet are pale in the shadows as he takes each step carefully, clinging to the bannister.

Wake up, he tells himself.

He doesn't.

But he remembers, vaguely, that power not working in some other dream. The one in the forest.

Is it normal, to remember a dream within a different dream?

He doesn’t remember getting to the front hall, doesn't know how long he's been standing in this pool of light at the foot of the stairs, attention turned inward, mind unspooling. Maybe he should return to bed. Sleep a while longer.

But he's still alone, and he likes that less than his disorientation. Hannibal must be here somewhere; he always is, in Will's dreams, except for when Will has shut him out. And Will hasn't shut him out; the longing in his chest won't allow it.

Will looks for the next light, and drifts toward it. Again, and again, into little ponds, little islands of floor lit bright, until he stands before a yawning emptiness he hasn't seen before.

Cellar, his mind supplies. Cool air twines around his ankles. Cool, like the river. Like the forest.

He descends.

Hannibal waits for him at the base of the stairs, holding out his hand.

“You’re just in time.”

Will reaches the floor and places his hand in Hannibal's readily, relief making him lightheaded. He'd felt the loss of their separation like an ache with every step. This is better.

"You waited for me," he says. His voice sounds odd. Feels odd, in his throat.

There's something else in this room he should be paying attention to, but he draws another step closer to Hannibal instead, lifting his other hand to touch the split of his lip, the edge of his cheek. He remembers it being red, before. Now it's purpled. A fierce bruise. An odd

detail, for a dream to preserve. But it *is* a dream, because his features don't seem to want to stay put. They waver, like a reflection. Shift into gauntness, then back. Antlers cast shade over the both of them.

Hannibal covers Will’s hand with his own and encourages him to press his fingers deep into the bruise. He says, “I couldn’t do this without you.”

He draws a hand down over Will’s eyes and Will closes them obediently. Hannibal maneuvers him through the dark, chest firm against Will’s back. It's like a dance, the way Hannibal repositions them and presses something into his grasp. A handle. *Knife*, he thinks, from some combination of the texture of it and the minor but present weight off its end. It's a light thing, not a killing weapon. A tool for different work.

Hannibal guides his hand forward, until there is the slightest resistance against the knife. And then he uncovers Will’s eyes.

“You provided the ingredients. I will tell you what we will do with them.”

The edge of the knife rests against a pallid throat.

For a moment, Will doesn't recognize Abel Gideon. The eyes are gone entirely, the face horribly damaged. And it's upside down. His mind doesn't want to right it. He blinks, frowning, as his head tilts slightly to the side.

Then he sees it. Gideon's lipless mouth twitches in a smirk, then goes slack again.

Dead. He's dead. But the dead do like to walk in Will's dreams. He wonders, if he parts the flesh with his knife, if Gideon will come back to him later without a head. Holding it, perhaps. And if Will transforms him, if he consumes him, will he never come back at all?

Will's breathing picks up, but only a little, and not in panic. In...curiosity. If this is a dream, there's no harm in pushing down. He's done worse. If it's *not* a dream, then...is there still any harm?

Hannibal slides his hand over Will’s fingers. Tightens his grip on the knife. “Let me be your guide, Will.”

"The tragedy would be to let him go to waste," Will murmurs, not entirely certain whether he’s speaking aloud. He adjusts the knife so that the point trails over the two puncture wounds from his lure. "Did you keep it for yourself?"

Hannibal presses a kiss to Will’s neck, just under his jaw. “I did. It was a gift.” He skims their knife back up to a soft point just under Gideon’s jaw and guides the blade in. Will watches closely. Feels the way flesh parts under the knife. It’s different from fish.

It feels *essential*.

“Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless,” Hannibal says, low and curling through his brain. The blade continues to move, stroke by stroke by stroke. “I want to give you your power back. This is yours to control. It does not control you.”

Will watches as they slowly bare cartilage and bone, and he even lends the power of his own hand when he remembers to. It feels good. It doesn't feel like food preparation, though, and he considers that, turns it back and forth.

They're hungry, and so they eat. Dream logic. But Hannibal eats in dreams and out. He has a hunger that cannot be sated by normal means.

"This soothes your ache," Will murmurs, reaching out with his unoccupied hand to feel Gideon's hair, to tilt the head back just a little to ease the path of the knife. "Not mine. But I understand it. I can feel it." The echo of the hunger.

"Having my appetite is not required," Hannibal says. "Understanding it is more than I could have ever hoped for."

Really, if the man is dead—and he is, all evidence of his eyes to the contrary, the way Gideon seems to gaze questioningly at him with his empty orbits—why not eat him? To hunt for food is something else. A question for another time. But Will wanted Abel Gideon dead. He delighted in the slaughter. And to the victor go the spoils.

Hannibal takes over as Will considers this new vantage point, scraping the last of the connective tissue away before loosening Will's grip and setting the knife aside. He keeps ahold of Will's waist with one hand as he reaches for the next tool. A bone saw, held in Will's hand and his. He adjusts their grip and draws it down against the opaque plane of Gideon's epiglottis.

The scraping of the saw rasps up Will's arm, into his shoulder, startling him. He stares down at their work, counts every stroke, gentles his hand in Gideon's hair as thick cartilage gives way to a gasp of space, and then the spine itself.

Hannibal helps him guide the teeth of the blade between the vertebrae. He stares down in wonder, the human body reducing to parts in a far more literal way than his mind has ever managed.

"Why do you hunt?" Will asks, even as the saw bites through the last of the spine, and Hannibal guides their hands away, swaps saw for knife once more. Will is the engine of the final paring, this time. Skin separates, and Gideon's head rocks back on the table. "It's not just to eat. There's something else."

He twists then, looks up into Hannibal's eyes, attentive. An eager student.

"Where did you learn this?"

Hannibal doesn't want to venture into those particular halls in his mind.

But Will's hooks are deep and abiding and he couldn't shake them now if he tried. He is dredging the waters deep in the well inside Hannibal. A good fisherman, through and through, but it's more than that.

Will is trying to learn him. To understand him beyond sex and profiles and the Marks on their skin. And it's a realization that happens in the space of a moment, but isn't a lightning strike. It's the tide and it's been coming ever closer since the day they met.

Hannibal wants to be understood.

So, he begins where many good stories start: at the beginning.

"When I was a boy, I hunted deer with my father and uncle. It was important to my father that I learned to dress a stag, even though we had staff for those sorts of tasks. And learn I did, but I didn't take to it. Animals interested me very little, and if I was to learn the anatomy of any kind of creature, it was to be studying the human form with my drawing tutor."

He carefully extricates himself from Will to move Gideon's head into the waiting stock pot beside the carving table. It will be joined by the hands and feet soon enough, and once he's taken care of the scalp and nails, they will all be rendered down together. Only then does he return to Will and carefully pull the saw from his loose grasp.

Hannibal licks his lips, a worry. He can't quite look at him. "I spoke to you once about my sister."

Will leans into him and strokes his jaw, light and soothing. "She sleepwalked. And she died too young to grow out of it."

Hannibal doesn't sink into Will's touch as normal. He can't. "My home country was invaded when I was only eleven years old. It was in the middle of winter when the soldiers came for us. They killed my parents and took my sister, Mischa, and I hostage. They marched us west towards my uncle's manor. To ransom us, I believe. But the snows came and the food went."

Hannibal breaks off, struggling *—say it out loud; it is important.*

"She was sleeping when they took her. I was too cold, too small, too hungry to fight. She didn't even wake up. In the morning they brought me soup, hot and good and full of meat. I didn't understand what they'd done until the fire went out. I found her teeth in the ashes. They were so small." Finally, he meets Will's gaze. "I do what was done to her."

"You butchered them," Will says. His eyes fill with tears, reflexive and reflective. "It's different, though, isn't it? You don't feel what you did for her when you eat them. She was the same as you. They are different. They deserve it."

Even as Will speaks, babbles, goes on, and the tears creep down his cheeks, Hannibal reaches out to brush them away. It is so foreign, shocking, horrifying even, to see the deep grief in Will's face. His own grief, a thing so unrecognizable that seeing it twist someone else's features and spill over from his eyes feels vulgar, too private *—he would do anything to make Will stop crying, to ease that pain and that in and of itself is foreign.*

He cradles Will's face, and swipes away streaking tears with his thumbs.

“They did. They do,” he says and even as his voice rasps, he reassures Will, “Nothing happened to me, Will. *I* happened.”

“Both can be true,” Will says. “And both can be terrible.”

Silence passes between them, and though Will’s mind should wander far and wide from the hallucinogenic tea Hannibal gave him earlier, he remains present. His pupils are wide and dark, but he is himself, tea or not. An impossible thing, here in his cellar, not flinching from what Hannibal asks of him. Offers to him.

“There is beauty, isn’t there?” Will asks, softly. “In what you do. In what you create. Aesthetics, triumphing over ethics, because ethics have no bearing on this world.”

“Beauty has meaning, as does cruelty,” Hannibal agrees but his voice can barely rise above a whisper. “In their most basic forms, both are honest.”

Will nuzzles against his palm in acceptance. Agreement, if Hannibal is lucky. And then he slowly turns back to Gideon. He reaches for the knife once more. “What next?”

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> *“Does that mean you love me, Dr. Lecter?” he murmurs, giddiness pushing up into his lungs. He knows it to be true, even as he says it, but there’s something—important to the acknowledgement.*
>
> *Even if this is a dream.*
>
> *(It isn’t a dream. The skin of his hands still feels slightly tight from butchering Abel Gideon. There is a tongue boiling away on the stove. He’s hungry.)*
>
> --
>
> Will reclaims his power. Hannibal confesses. They eat.

They butcher Abel Gideon together.

Will hazily assists with everything save for the legs, which Hannibal sets aside with talk of cured hams. In the end, all that comes up from the cellar with them is a section of ribs, Gideon’s tongue, and the stock pot containing head, hands, and feet.

The kitchen is already prepared, ingredients lined up along the island counter. The stock pot goes on the stove, along with a smaller vessel. Hannibal takes Will’s hand and draws him close. The nightgown flutters around his calves, now stained with smears of blood and synovial fluid.

Hannibal presses a new, heavier knife into Will’s hand, and steers him towards several onions. “Slice these, if you would.”

Oddly, the vegetables take more concentration than the meat. There was a logic to the butchering, each muscle distinct and traceable, married to its neighbors by soft seams easily split with the slightest pressure. A certain puzzle-like quality to breaking it all down. The onions have their rings, but the blade slices across them, disrupting the pattern.

The whole time, Will never loses track of Hannibal; he stands on the other side of the kitchen island, his knife and fingers crushing herbs, releasing perfume into the air. His eyes rarely leave Will. It makes up for the distance between them.

After the onions are done, a pile of disjointed shards, Will frowns for a long time at the large cap of a mushroom, not sure if the gills need to be removed or not.

A glance up, and Hannibal indicates *yes*. He gets to work.

There is a brief moment when Hannibal leaves him, and Will turns to watch. He only goes as far as the stove, to tend to his cooking, but it leaves Will untethered, drifting. The knife goes still in his hand, and he watches, filled with longing, as Hannibal's fingers slide over a dial, fine and strong and tensing tight.

Just above his hand, a strong flame leaps up. The added light makes him stir. "How often," Will says, voice halting and slow, still not entirely sure he's awake, but not entirely wanting to be dreaming, either, "do you have such a—a—largess?" The Ripper doesn't take whole bodies—but then, if he did, would Crawford even know? Will's frown intensifies. "It was a lot of...meat."

Gideon. Abel Gideon had been made up of so much meat. All of it fell apart into such orderly portions. Will has so often thought of humans as merely bodies, but that is different from their careful butchery. This really is *meat*. Food. It looks like food.

His gaze drifts to the tongue, resting on the counter nearest Hannibal.

Is food. His stomach twists, and he isn't sure in which direction.

"It is," Hannibal says. "And I generally only come into such a bounty when I host a dinner party. A feast must always present itself."

Hannibal returns to Will's side, gathers the onions and adds them to the smaller pot alongside some garlic.

"I've gone without for years before. Two after Jack's trainee. I had to be much more careful." He leaves the stove and comes up behind Will. "These days it's hardly more than several months."

"Any longer and the meat spoils," Will murmurs. He looks down at the nightgown, plucks at the fabric. (His fingers are dirty; they leave more smudges.)

Jack's trainee. The Ripper. Miriam Lass—

"Is this Miriam's?" Will asks. "Whose is this?"

It's mine. But it isn't, if this isn't a dream, and—is this a dream?

Will is starting to think not. It's been going on for too long. It's too mundane. Hannibal hasn't torn his belly open yet.

Hannibal traps Will's hand as he starts to pick at the seams where cotton meets lace and slips his other arm around Will's waist. Holds him tight.

In his ear, he murmurs, "Given that I purchased it, I'd say it belongs to me, though I confess I don't wear it."

Will shivers, and leans back into him. "Then why did you buy it? You're not married."

His thoughts spin back to the first time he stood in this kitchen. He should have known, back then. Who else doesn't employ servants and isn't married, at Hannibal's level of attainment?

He grins. "Should've known, about you. Should've looked closer."

"You did know," Hannibal says and draws a finger down the line of lace down the front of Will's throat. "You were afraid to look. Until you weren't."

He lets go, smoothing his hand over Will's belly as he pulls away.

"I saw you," Will agrees. "That first night. When you told me to go somewhere calm, you were already there on the banks of my river. The Ripper had always hidden from me—until then." His hands flatten over where Hannibal had touched, still warm. "You emerged from the shadows. No longer an absence in the shape of a man, but a presence. I thought…I thought it was because we'd talked about the Ripper being Marked."

His glance up is coy, but also wondering. "But you had already taken up residence in my head."

"And you took up in mine shortly thereafter. You gave me dreams for the first time in years." The water in the smaller pot begins to boil. Hannibal adds the tongue and says, "It's not often I cook alongside someone else."

Will leans back against the island counter, with a lazy smile as his head lolls slightly to one side. But his gaze remains focused. He hears the confession in those words, sees the vulnerability Hannibal is extending.

"It's okay," Will says. "I'll be gentle with you. As gentle as I can be."

Hannibal's mouth tugs up at one side. "I know. Because that is in your nature. A kindness I would never think to give." Hannibal closes the space between them, and places his hands on either side of Will, bracketing him. "No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love we see potential in our beloved. As I see it, your potential is as much compassion as it is violence. Either one liable to hurt or heal. "

Will cants toward him, one of his hands tracing the line of Hannibal's apron along his waist.

"Does that mean you love me, Dr. Lecter?" he murmurs, giddiness pushing up into his lungs. He knows it to be true, even as he says it, but there's something—important to the acknowledgement.

Even if this is a dream.

(It isn't a dream. The skin of his hands still feels slightly tight from butchering Abel Gideon. There is a tongue boiling away on the stove. He's hungry.)

Hannibal steps closer. Will's fingers pluck at the apron's ties, and Hannibal pulls the fabric from his waist. Then he catches Will's wandering hand and directs it to his hip, draws his nose alongside Will's jaw and up to his ear, where he breathes, "Do you see your potential, Will?"

Will hums a pleased little sound. His hand tightens on Hannibal's hip. It's all reflex, but the reflex comes from a settled place inside of him. Beyond all the jagged upheaval of the last few days, there is solid ground. He stands on it now.

"I'm awake," he says slowly, testing the concept. "You gave me something, didn't you?"

"Only something to help you associate. A hallucinogenic tea. It's safe. I've been told it can create a positive, even spiritual, experience for those who take it," he says and kisses Will's curls. "No more bad dreams, Will."

"The bad dreams always come back," he assures Hannibal, even as he wriggles slightly under his touch. "But not tonight. Not right now."

Hannibal slips a hand up Will's side, dragging a bit of the nightgown between his fingers. "Seeing as you're somewhat present, *this* is hardly required. If you'd prefer something else. An apron of your own, perhaps."

Hannibal's hand is warm through the soft fabric of the nightgown.

"Do you not like me in it?" Will says.

"I like you in most anything. You may wear whatever you like. Or nothing at all, as the case may be," Hannibal says, turning the bit of fabric under his fingers into a rucked handful.

His mind is prone to associate now, and he remembers the first night he'd stayed in this house. Hannibal could have offered him this nightgown then. Didn't. Because he preferred the thought of Will naked in his sheets already, or because—

Because it would have raised too many questions, because it *is* Miriam's. Will's sure, now.

The realization brings only curiosity, not anger or terror or disgust.

"Does it make you think of her?"

At Will's question, Hannibal lets the nightgown slip from his grasp.

—there was once a little sleepwalking girl who had padded through the halls of Lecter manor with whisper-soft footsteps, who nearly tripped over the lace hem of her nightgown; she had already wandered out into his thoughts this evening, unbidden; he guides her back through the palace of his memory, tucks her back away where she can be safe—

It belatedly occurs to him that Will, quick to put pieces together especially under the influence of the hallucinogenic tea, isn't talking about Mischa at all. He's talking about Miriam Lass—*an interesting topic, all things considered, one the two of them have never actually discussed.*

"It does," Hannibal answers, flattening his hand over Will's hip. "The last person who wore this got the closest to seeing me that anyone ever had, before you. It seemed fitting, among serving other purposes."

Will absorbs this, lips slightly parted, before undoing the buttons of the nightgown. With a murmured reminder of *sutures*, Hannibal helps ease the nightgown over his head. He lets it fall to the wayside and admires the pale line of Will's chest, a garden of bruises in different stages of purple-blue-yellow-black bloom. Hannibal ghosts his fingertips over every single one of them—*and wishes he remembered which were his.*

He reaches around Will for the knife and places it in Will's hand again, sure and steady.

"Tonight is about giving you your power back," he says for the second time that night, closing Will's fingers around the handle. "All I ask is to let me know if I should take anything off the heat."

Don't be gentle.

Will looks up at him, expression wavering between curiosity and certainty, and leans back, putting space between them.

"Thank you," he says. "Though I think your approach might be considered unorthodox."

He slips the knife into the button placket of Hannibal's shirt, and slices up.

Pearly buttons snap and ping off the edge of the knife. Hannibal turns his head just in time, but feels the whisper of the blade graze his jaw. The kitchen is quiet except for the sound of their breathing and the soft patter of buttons raining to the ground.

"I am quite forgiving of the unorthodox," Hannibal says. His eyes slip shut. "Do you often go through clothing this quickly, Will? This shirt will be rather expensive to repair."

When he opens his eyes again, he is met first by the healing but still mottled bruise on the bridge of Will's nose. For a moment, his lips twitch toward a snarl. He'd have killed Gideon himself simply for laying a hand to Will's lovely face. He's still furious, even though he knows it will heal.

"I'd prefer not to repair my trousers," he says instead, redirecting back to safer ground.

"I'm sure you would," Will says with a grin, then chides, "Hannibal, you don't get to set the terms of your vulnerability. Though you always could've stripped *before* handing me the knife."

His free hand pulls the shirt from Hannibal's shoulders. The knife slides to Hannibal's belly, but he simply holds the tip against the waistband of his trouserI It's a question. A choice.

"I could have," Hannibal agrees, stepping back from Will just a fraction and watching, rapt, as Will's tongue darts out to wet his lips. "But I was curious what you would do."

He unfastens his trousers and slips them down along with his underclothes, slow enough for Will to watch if he so desires. This is not about sex, not entirely, but it's impossible not to notice how hard Will is already. Hannibal toes the rest of his clothes onto the heap of the discarded nightgown and sliced shirt and moves forward again. Close enough that the point of the knife digs into his hipbone. Not yet enough pressure to bleed.

Will shifts the blade against him. If he were to press down, it would delve in deep.

And, dizzyingly, immediately, Hannibal *wants.*

“You’d let me do it again,” Will murmurs. The knife drags a thin scoring line over his hipbone, down further. “Gut you just to be inside of you. You’d withstand the pain. Enjoy it, even. Then rebuild yourself and come back to me. Anything I do to you, you’ll come back to me.”

Hannibal runs his tongue across his bottom lip, an unconscious thing.

“Yes. Every time. No matter what you did or said. If it is by your hand, I want it. I’ve felt you in places no one has ever touched, not even me. You left fingerprints on my viscera, my ribs. Indelible,” he answers. His voice rasps and he swallows hard when the knife reaches its apparent destination, the burn on his thigh. Persistent, no matter how many times he sheds his skin. “Though a knife is hardly required, should you want to get inside me again.”

Will traces the outline of the shiny scar and murmurs, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

But he pulls the knife away and sets it back on the counter. The angle arches his back, and Will curls a possessive, steadying hand over Hannibal’s hip. Hannibal leans into the feeling of every inch of Will’s skin pressed to his and pushes him back against the counter. He braces an arm behind Will’s back and lets his free hand travel, touch, skim patterns over ribs and around the watery edges of bruises.

Hannibal holds him close, close enough that breathing and kissing are the same thing, but wishes he could clutch Will even closer. Flow into him and him into Will. Consumed, subsumed.

“We’ve got it bad for each other,” Will whispers against his lips. “Obsessed. Addicted. When did that happen?”

“The moment you bared my Mark,” Hannibal answers, more heat and breath than words, “and there was the smallest shred of hope, the possibility of not being alone.”

He brushes his lips against Will’s in a proper kiss. Will returns it with fervor, no elegance, just need and exultation. He rocks his hips against Hannibal’s, sighing into his mouth. Hannibal restrains himself from returning the favor, the friction, but harder—*with purpose, but no, he is in control and not in control; he put the power into Will’s hands but cannot determine how Will is going to use it.* That, in and of itself, takes the most restraint of all.

“I have you beat,” Will confesses when they break for air. “But not by much. Guess.”

Hannibal thinks back through their weeks together and draws his teeth along Will’s jaw, rough.

“Unlikely when I smelled you. Perhaps my promise to protect your interests?” he murmurs, then pauses and moves to nip at Will’s ear. “It chafes you, to be taken care of, to be looked out for, but that doesn’t stop you from wanting it.”

Will shivers. “You’re—you’re not wrong. But it was earlier. The first time you touched me. When we were still pretending it was only the headaches.” His throat bobs as he swallows. His pupils are wide, gaze adoring. “You weren’t afraid of me, and you weren’t deluded as to what I was. You were—insistent, but in a way that made me want to let you in. Do you know how rare that is?”

It’s fascinating and thrilling to hear Will share so openly, associate freely and without tension in his jaw or resignation in his eyes. At his question, Hannibal nods—*yes, Will has given him a rare gift.*

His words are mostly breath, mostly murmured against cartilage. “I have a concept.”

Will’s hand drifts down to grip Hannibal’s cock lightly. Hannibal’s breath hitches and he drops a hand to the edge of the prep table, fingers tightening. He’s not as hard as Will, but the catch of those calluses on Will’s fingers is more than helping him get there.

“I was so ashamed,” Will whispers. “I wanted to kiss you that night, at dinner. I didn’t know why. But it—it was because you saw me, and didn’t assume, and didn’t turn away.”

There is still the faintest trace of shame in Will’s voice as he thinks about himself. Hannibal wishes he could wipe it away. But the last step must be Will’s, and Will’s alone.

“You’re not alone in the dark, Will. I’m standing right beside you.” Hannibal moves back enough to see him fully. “I am not looking away.”

“No,” Will agrees, pleased. “You’re not. You’ve watched me, guided me through the dark, made me feel pain—and power.” He reaches back, pries Hannibal’s hands from the counter and guides them to the swell of his ass. “Now make me feel good.”

It’s a selfish demand, but one that comes from deep inside him, below skin and bone, into the meat of his heart. He craves the reconnection of pleasure, completing their circuit, the last thing still lost between them in the bloody wreckage of the last two days.

He offers it up, orders it, and gives himself over entirely.

Hannibal digs nails into Will’s ass and captures his mouth, favoring his lower lip with his teeth. Will bites off a sharp noise of pain, and Hannibal gentles by degrees. He dances fingers over Will’s hip and then between them in an effort to coax Will’s grip from his cock.

He pulls back with a slender smile and says, “As soon as the tongue is cooled and dinner is prepped.”

There’s a moment where Will strongly considers telling Hannibal to ignore it, just to see what will happen.

But this meal is important. Will knows exactly what is being cooked. Provided the meat, even. So Will relinquishes his hold, but not before he twists his wrist enough to give Hannibal a pointed, lascivious stroke.

And then, a little awkwardly given his stitches, he wriggles up to sit on the prep counter, legs spread, watching Hannibal closely.

“I can wait,” he says, voice low and sinful.

Hannibal, naked and clearly wanting just as much as Will is, goes to work. For everything that has been stripped away, he is still in his element here as much as Will imagines he is killing a man.

(And Will wants to see him kill. Wants to know if that can be made into art as well, or if it will always be a base thing, an ugly thing. Was it ugly, when he killed Gideon? He remembers so many versions of the moment. He remembers feeling transcendent in every one.)

Will tracks Hannibal as he moves across the kitchen. He’s trying very hard; Will can see it in the way his erection manages to flag despite Will’s unwavering, burning gaze. Despite the way Will takes himself in hand, gives his cock a few languid strokes, his breath hitching in a way he’s certain will bring the fox running to the hen house. Hannibal’s self control is exquisite, and Will wants to break it.

The tongue emerges from the pot. The ribs are seasoned, Hannibal’s broad hands rubbing spices into every crevice. Will’s legs spread a little farther, moans a little louder.

Hannibal stops, at last, and Will watches his chest hitch, some desperate marshaling of self control. Beside him, Gideon’s tongue steams softly in the low light.

Finally, Hannibal washes his hands, then picks up a wooden spoon and crosses the kitchen to Will. He stands close but not quite close enough.

"Cooking this way is rather precarious," Hannibal says. He bites a rough kiss from Will's lips and then levels his gaze at him. "I find myself sorely distracted."

Dangle something Hannibal wants in front of him, and the man is very easy to entice—but he will always think he is still in control. He holds the spoon up, handle held horizontally in line with Will's mouth.

"Open."

Will parts his lips and gently sets his teeth around the wood.

And then, when Hannibal has his back once more to him, Will is silent. Hannibal will be listening for any sign of disobedience, and the quiet will be far more distracting, more infuriating, than any enticing sound he could make.

Instead, he closes his eyes and remembers the feel of Hannibal’s mouth on him. The soft eddies of the hallucinogen map the memory onto his body, and he wants to shift into it, but holds himself back. The pot simmers softly on the stove. Hannibal’s knife scrapes against the tongue. Pleasure sparks in a lazy roll up his spine, and Will gives in, rocking into the phantom sensations.

It takes far more effort to fight off the sounds that build in his throat than it does to conjure the path of lips along his cock, the faint scrape of teeth. The soft sounds of Hannibal plating their meal are very far away. The drip of sauce onto meat is lost in the click of his throat as he swallows. All of his attention is on the soft burn in his thighs as he holds them wide, the press of long-fingered hands against his flesh. It's so real, but his Mark is quiescent on his breast; it's only his thoughts, coalesced into the shape of the Ripper, kneeling between his legs.

He loses the fight; a soft moan slips out around the spoon, and his jaw relaxes. The wood slips, begins to roll from his mouth. And then Hannibal is there, *really* there, gently taking the spoon.

Hannibal says, "Don't open your eyes. Tell me what you see."

Will keeps his eyes shut. His head tips back, increasing the pressure on his swollen nose, but baring his throat.

"You," he murmurs. "Crowned in antlers." His fingers twitch on the countertop as he resists the urge to reach for what he knows isn't there. No, *is* there, just not physically. Flickers of a dream return, and he groans, a searing pain flaring in his chest even as phantom, wet heat engulfs his cock once more. "Swallowing me down, into your throat. There's so much space inside of you to fill."

He registers, distantly, the sound of a plate being set down beside him.

"Keep your eyes closed," Hannibal breathes.

He slides his hands up Will's thighs, lightly scoring nails along his skin. He peppers tiny kisses, interspersed with grazes of teeth, along the exposed length of Will's neck. It's as if there are two of Hannibal now, one still sucking hard between his legs, the other tasting his throat.

"Open, if you would."

Will's lips part, and he *wants*—he wants to open his eyes—wants to see what he's about to eat, but he doesn't need to *see* it, he knows it, he *knows* it.

The flesh touches his tongue. He closes his teeth around the fork, slides the meat from the tines. The flavor is already spreading, and when he bites, when he closes the loop that began with him recognizing at last what Hannibal hungered for and then beating this man to death and bringing him as an offering to Hannibal's table—

Will comes with a wild, sobbing moan.

Hannibal keeps a careful hold on Will through his orgasm.

No one has ever reacted quite so spectacularly to his cooking and he's fairly certain no one ever will again—*he is merely thankful he was allowed to watch it happen this time.* He sets

the fork down and thumbs flecks and streaks of wayward spend off himself before pressing a kiss to the edge of Will's mouth.

"You continue to surprise me," he says, affectionate.

Will is far more a mess than he is. A fortuitous thing, as Hannibal never wastes an opportunity to taste. He draws far enough away to let Will fall back onto his elbows, twitching and spent and eyes barely open, before bending down to lick him clean.

Will gasps out his name, helpless.

Hannibal takes his time, slow and methodical. Will tangles one hand in his hair, but provides no direction. He's too busy squirming, legs tensing, one foot bracing against the edge of the counter. The last time Hannibal did this, he had diligently avoided anywhere that could be oversensitive. This time, he licks and sucks every last inch of Will clean, moving with him instead of pinning him to the counter. It's a dizzying taste and it stokes his ignored arousal, as does Will watching him through eyes vague and barely open.

He straightens up, letting out a sigh of approval as Will's grip in his hair not only follows, but tightens. Hannibal gently nudges him to sit fully upright and Will wraps his legs around him, drapes an arm around his waist. He traces the bites on Will's stomach with an absent finger.

"I'm not certain that counted as me making you feel good," Hannibal notes, "but we have time."

"It was you. You, both sides of you—no, there are no sides—*fuck*—" Will says, half a whine.

Hannibal draws his fingers lightly up and down the arm at his waist. "We are all multifaceted, Will. I have just as many sides as anyone else."

"And the food—you did that too, as much as I did." Will's gaze drifts to the plate. "I want more."

Hannibal freezes—*still, too still but he doesn't have to hide these kinds of things anymore.* Nor does he have to hide the way disbelief scrubs all expression off his face.

It's likely the drugs, the positive associations. It could also be his deft handling of the tongue and its sauce. He wants it to be more. Will doesn't have to share his appetite but he wants him to share in the bounty of it.

Hannibal draws a thumb over his lips, catching on the lower one.

"This is your design," he says. "You can have anything. Everything."

"I want you," Will says, and his eyes shine with more than lust. "I want all of you."

Hannibal only pulls his thumb away from Will's mouth when he brings another tender slice of tongue to his lips. Will takes the slice of tongue between his teeth with utmost care. His eyelids flutter.

He chews. Savors. Swallows.

“I brought that to your table,” he murmurs, full of pleased wonder. He reaches for the plate and plucks up another slice. Presents it, reverently. “Eat with me.”

Quietly, voice catching, Hannibal says, “Of course.”

He takes the slice carefully in his teeth. It splits neatly in his grip, perfectly cooked. He closes his lips on Will’s fingers as he pulls away—*so that after, when he licks the sauce from his lips, he tastes Will as well.*

They feed each other one bite at a time. Shared between them, it tastes like a blessing, feels like a miracle. Hannibal moves closer, crowds Will in more, eventually pulls him so far forward that he’s barely balanced on the counter. By the time the plate is empty and Hannibal takes Will’s fingers into his mouth to lick them clean, Will’s breath is hot on his cheek and his lips brand kisses along Hannibal’s jaw.

Will’s heel drags over the swell of Hannibal’s calf, his fingers mapping out Hannibal’s ribs, ghosting over the stretch of unmarked skin where Will had gutted him.

Hannibal is mildly impressed—*and delighted*—that Will is getting hard again and is shamelessly nuzzling at his throat. He has been mostly successful at ignoring his own arousal but the lave of Will’s tongue against his Mark goes straight to his cock.

“Do we still have time?” Will murmurs against the hollow of his throat.

Instead of answering, Hannibal catches Will’s lips, too hard, too biting for Will’s broken nose. But Will grins despite the ways his body shivers and Hannibal urges his legs tighter, coaxes his arms to loop around his neck. Hannibal only pulls off Will’s mouth long enough to reach blindly for the cooking oil he’d set within reaching distance on the counter just for this purpose.

“Hold onto this, if you would,” Hannibal says.

Will takes the bottle from Hannibal, and clutches tight when Hannibal lifts him from the counter.

“Laying me out in the kitchen once was enough?” he teases, breathlessly, as Hannibal takes them out into the hall.

“No,” Hannibal growls against his mouth. “Never enough.”

The layout of the house wavers in Will’s mind as they move through the darkened house, but then he sees the fireplace, empty and cold. The couch, still bloodstained.

The rug, which Hannibal eases him down onto, stiff against his back with more of the same.

The room where he’d killed himself. Where the Unnamed had almost made Hannibal do the same. Gideon’s hands, stitching those terrible wounds closed.

Will makes a broken little sound, caught up in the history of them.

Hannibal pulls away from Will only to slip some pillows from the couch under him, to ease his side. Then his hand is possessive and hot on Will's stomach as he slides down between his legs to wrap his lips around Will's half-hard cock. Coaxing, enticing, licking the length of him slowly, pressing teasing lips and brushes of tongue to the head.

Between the pillows and Hannibal's hand, Will can't jerk enough to jar his stitches, and he also can't move enough to really thrust into Hannibal's mouth. But he tries, he *tries*, and his mind spins between the immediate pleasure, the echo of overstimulation, and the hallucinatory delight of his own imaginings.

Make a feast of me, he thinks, wildly, one hand tangling tight in Hannibal's hair.

(It feels different from how Gideon's had when they scalped him.)

His other hand releases the neck of the oil bottle. It stabilizes upright, but only barely. Hannibal is tasting rather than devouring, and Will still isn't sure he can withstand it.

Hannibal seems to know. He takes him deep only once more, then pops his mouth off. He leans over Will to grab the bottle, coats his hand, and quickly works one finger into Will's body.

Will's breath comes in quick, needy pants as he's opened up. The touch is euphoric, and it's hard to keep his eyes open. But he does. And he doesn't look away from Hannibal, even as his cheeks and chest flush red.

Something writhes between them, in their shared gaze.

"I am yours, Will." Hannibal slides a second finger in. "Are you mine?" His voice goes raw as he whispers, "Can you forgive me?"

Will shudders as he cups Hannibal's jaw. "For concealing yourself? For sending Gideon after me? For being what you are?"

The Ripper. A monster. Something very like a god.

Will makes himself consider it in full, even though it would be so easy to babble meaningless reassurances with the way Hannibal keeps stroking him. There, at the core of him, is something like anger. Close to betrayal. But it is cooling in the certainty that the revelations between them have been dramatic but not devastating. They remain, at the center of it all.

Will doesn't have to lose this.

"I forgive you," he breathes, then chokes down a moan on the next stroke of Hannibal's hand. "I'm yours, Hannibal. Without end."

A look of relief comes over Hannibal's face and he slows, slows his movements so much that Will wants to cry at the loss of it.

“Without end,” he agrees.

Without end.

Hannibal finally strokes oil onto his cock. He catches Will’s hand, tangles their fingers together and braces it above Will’s head before sinking into him.

It isn’t needy or desperate or fast. It’s slow and rocking and deep.

Hannibal’s grasp keeps him from reaching, touching, urging things faster. He’s loud, not in protest, but in the inescapable beauty of it all. The sun is just rising, and light spills in through the window behind Hannibal, limning his outline. The last of the drugs in Will’s system turn the glow to gold.

In one moment, Hannibal is gaunt and antlered, and in another, he is just a man, and no matter the form Will’s mind presents to him, he is in love. He arches with the rhythm of Hannibal’s body, head tipped back but gaze fixed, tears gathering as the pleasure builds and builds.

“Too much,” he hears himself gasp. “Not enough. I can’t—*Hannibal*—”

—yes, too much and not enough; both; Will is always both in a way he isn’t—

Will is achingly beautiful and he is here and Hannibal will burn the world down to keep him.

Hannibal thrusts into him, just a little faster, and murmurs, “You can.”

He wants it all. He wants to look deep into that steady blue gaze and watch everything fall away. Brick by brick, stone by stone, dismantling. Veils tossed aside. No need to find footholds and climb over walls that are no longer standing.

—they can meet there, surrounded by the evidence of years of building forts and defenses to wall themselves in, letting the dawn spill over it all—

No more walls.

Hannibal whispers, “I am in love with you.”

Will’s cry is loud and wounded, and he surges up to catch Hannibal’s mouth. Hannibal meets him halfway, practically crushing him to the floor, pushing deeper, deeper. Will opens against him, but inside he’s clutching tight around his cock. Skin to skin, secrets to secrets, and all the while Hannibal has been a whirlwind force of change in Will’s life these past weeks, Will has been a quiet eddy in his, changing him the way the river wears stone smooth.

—this is something he can never come back from; he is in free fall and he hopes he never hits the bottom—

A moan ricochets between their mouths, its origin unclear, and Will clenches around him again. Hannibal comes with his face ducked against Will’s neck, his world nothing but dark

and white-hot pleasure and Will.

After a few rutting thrusts up against him, Will follows after, clutching him tight with hands and body, gasping against the shell of his ear. Will rocks his hips slowly as he comes down, refusing to let go even as the sunlight grows brighter. Hannibal presses kisses against Will's neck, murmuring to him in his native tongue, luxuriating in the warm light on his back and the warm, pliant body underneath him.

He releases his grip on Will's hand and pushes himself up onto his elbows to watch him, but Will's eyes are sagging closed.

"Wake me up for dinner," he murmurs, words slurring slightly. "Don't want to miss it."

When Will's hand at last slips out of his hair, Hannibal pulls out—*which will result in another historic stain for this carpet; or more likely the pillows underneath Will*—and gets to his feet. He only leaves Will, sprawled and mussed and dozing, long enough to retrieve a blanket.

Will makes a soft noise when Hannibal wraps it around him and then a weak, irritated grumble when Hannibal lifts him, cocooned, into his arms. He bears them upstairs and into the washroom. He has to twist slightly, uncomfortable, but he manages to catch Will's mouth in a deliberate kiss.

"While my tongue might suffice for parts of you," he says between kisses, trying to coax Will awake enough to not slump to the floor as he sets him on the ground. "You need a bath."

Will mumbles something unintelligible, but soon starts hazily kissing back.

"Always so ready to taste," he says with a sleepy grin. He stretches out one leg, nudging his foot against Hannibal's. "Do your worst."

"I always do," Hannibal says, smiling as Will's eyelids drift closed again.

He lets Will doze again as he draws a reasonable amount of water into the tub and wipes himself down, careful of the sensitive injuries on his face courtesy of Jack Crawford. Even when he goes to pick him up, Will doesn't protest being lifted into the tub. Hannibal watches him drift in and out of wakefulness—*dark lashes trembling and then fluttering rapidly whenever Will peels his eyes open a sliver*—and carefully starts cleaning his wounds. He washes him entirely, periodically pulling the stop to let sweat and spend and suds twist down the drain.

Hannibal takes the most pleasure in how Will melts under him when he washes his hair. He takes his time.

They have time.

Drying him is more difficult than washing him, but eventually he carries a warm, slightly damp Will up to his bedroom and guides him to slip under the bedclothes. It hardly takes any persuading; within minutes, Will's chest moves in a slow, somnolent roll.

Hannibal dresses and locks the bedroom door behind him.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

He can only gaze up at Will's bruised face and its pretty frown. He can only bow his head, hide his face in Will's lap. Only then can he finally summon words and when he does, they are quiet—he doesn't know where they come from but he can't help but offer them anyway.

"We could disappear now. Tonight. Leave a note for anyone who needs notes left for. Never see anyone here or Jack Crawford again. Almost polite."

Above him, Will's breath catches. Fingers slide into his hair, gently tug until he looks up. Up at Will, who looks down at him like he's been offered something delicate and precious and he's trying hold it close without crushing it.

"Then we go tonight," Will whispers.

--

To the truth, and all its consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over the next few hours, Will's fever breaks.

He'd been almost clear headed by dawn, even with the drugs Hannibal had slipped into his tea, and his body at last turns the corner his brain has already rounded. Will's sleep becomes not just exhausted, but restful. He sleeps through the height of morning, clear into early afternoon. He wakes once or twice, enough to notice he feels a little better and to realize he's no longer in the guest room. No longer tied down, either. The sheets smell like Hannibal, and he nestles down into them again, sinks once more.

He does dream, once. A normal dream. Not even a nightmare. Hannibal stands beside him on the roof of a tall building, the both of them looking out over the city below. Wind stings their exposed Marks.

The urge to tip them both over the edge swells within him, and it is beautiful.

Will wakes up standing on the window sill. Leaded glass keeps him from tipping forward, though he's gotten the sash up. He's entirely naked, cool wind tickling at his feet. Will blinks, staring down at the street below, and then swears and clambers down.

Behind him, the door unlocks and eases open.

“I suppose I should’ve bolted that as well,” Hannibal says. “I’m uncertain if the neighbors will mind the show.”

"Opening windows is—new," he says. His voice is hoarse from disuse, but is undeniably his. Worn out, entirely coherent Will Graham.

He retreats to the bed, a blush staining his face and chest. He wants to hide himself, but what is there, really, to hide now? Slowly, his posture relaxes, and he gazes up at Hannibal, half expecting some renewed emotional or psychological conflict from looking upon his bruised face and split lip.

(*What a pair we make*, he thinks, absently touching his nose; now notably less swollen, but still distractingly uncomfortable.)

There's no conflict. He remembers the previous night, as if it were a dream, but he knows it was real. The knowledge gives him comfort. He manages a smile.

"Come to fetch me for dinner?" he asks, vaguely remembering he'd asked to be woken for it.

(*Dinner. Abel Gideon's meat.* He waits for a rush of disgust. it doesn't come.)

Hannibal smiles. “Not just yet. But you are more than welcome to join me in the kitchen. Though this time, I do recommend dressing.” His head cants, just slightly, and Will snorts. That kitchen has certainly seen enough of his skin. “The wardrobe should have everything you need.”

Will studies Hannibal. "In my size?" he asks, but then doesn't wait for an answer. He stands, and walks to the wardrobe himself, favoring his injured side.

Inside are not just clothes in his size, but *his* clothes. He rubs his fingers over the worn wool of one of his older waistcoats, then glances over his shoulder at Hannibal.

"Am I moving in?" he drawls, lifting his brows expectantly. He tries to hide his pleased shiver at the idea.

I am in love with you whispers through his mind.

Hannibal comes up beside Will at the wardrobe, gaze trailing over the clothes absently.

“Despite earlier evidence to the contrary, I don’t have any plans to dress you up,” he says. “Or to...control you.” Hannibal turns to him. “What you wear to dinner is up to you. As is staying in my home. It’s open to you, regardless.”

“Would you *let* me move in?” he rephrases, needing to hear something a little more solid. “Would you want me to?”

Not to better keep an eye on him, but to…live with him. It’s all very domestic. Will thinks he should want to return to his own house, that it’s probably a sign of trauma that he doesn’t, but

really, he just doesn't want more time apart. No more three day waiting periods, not after the crucible of the last two.

He meets Hannibal's gaze steadily for a long moment, then turns back to the wardrobe.

The truth is fairly simple.

Before Will, Hannibal had been content, entirely and completely. And after Will, he'd been no less content when he'd return to his home, but it hadn't been long until he started to realize that it would all be better with company.

And now he knows the only company he would ever want would be Will.

"I don't know that it would be wise. Though I want it, all the same." He runs his tongue over his bottom lip, thinking. "The wiser thing would be to head out of the city for several days, a week. I have a small house half a day's travel from here. We could think of it as practice, if you'd come with me."

Will turns back to him, eyes clear and focused. He lifts one hand, touches the bruise along Hannibal's jaw with gentle fingertips. Hannibal's eyes slip shut and he leans into the touch to feel it sting.

"Jack won't approve if I move in...but he can't interfere if we're not in the city. He'll be angry when we return, though," Will ventures, then pauses, turning something over in his mind. "I'll need to speak to him before we leave."

"He insisted on being the first person you spoke to as soon as you returned to your right mind," Hannibal agrees, then lets his eyes open again. "Will, I already promised you that you wouldn't have to lie to Jack. And I keep my promises."

All too soon, Will pulls away and finds the rest of an outfit. He moves to the bed to pull on his underclothes, needing to sit between stages, and Hannibal goes with him, helps him ease the arm on his injured side into his shirt.

"And what does that mean, to you?" Will asks, allowing Hannibal to assist him into trousers next. "Just to make sure we're on the same page."

"Jack is under the impression that I have been observing you since he sent me to look in on you. That I am keeping your Mark a secret in order to study the effects it has on the mind. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for anyone, let alone a medical doctor." After a minute, as he guides Will into his waistcoat, he adds, "He also believes I'm taking advantage of you. I admit I'm not sure if it would be prudent to disabuse him of that notion. Or if it even can be done."

Will is lucid now and it's clear when he takes a closer look that he's both furious at and troubled by the damage to Hannibal's face.

“I don’t think it can be done. He won’t exactly take my word that I’ve wanted every step of this.” He pauses, catching his breath. “So the only falsehood in that is the omission of your own Mark, from a certain angle.”

“There’s a certain alchemy to lies and truths,” Hannibal says, retrieving a set of socks and shoes and placing them at Will’s feet. “I would hardly classify that particular omission as a falsehood.”

Will’s expression hardens. “Lie or not, I will not let him have that.”

Hannibal smiles. “I’m glad.”

“I don’t intend to turn you in for—the rest, either. But if Jack begins to suspect on his own—” Will cuts himself off and sighs, eyeing his socks almost mournfully. “One conversation should be safe. One conversation about the Mark. He’ll be focused on it. On what it means. He has no reason to bring up the Ripper.”

Hannibal catches the thoroughly dispirited look and pushes down lightly on his shoulders until Will gingerly sits down again. Swiping up the socks, he kneels and slips them onto Will’s feet, quick and efficient, followed by his shoes.

Strictly speaking, he has options. Doors and windows he’s left open for himself, possibilities more than outright plans. People to potentially take the fall, old ghosts to resurrect, things to return that don’t belong to him. But when Hannibal goes to reassure Will of all the possibilities at their fingertips, his lips won’t move.

He can only gaze up at Will’s bruised face and its pretty frown. He can only bow his head, hide his face in Will’s lap. Only then can he finally summon words and when he does, they are quiet—*he doesn’t know where they come from but he can’t help but offer them anyway.*

“We could disappear now. Tonight. Leave a note for anyone who needs notes left for. Never see anyone here or Jack Crawford again. Almost polite.”

Above him, Will’s breath catches. Fingers slide into his hair, gently tug until he looks up. Up at Will, who looks down at him like he’s been offered something delicate and precious and he’s trying hold it close without crushing it.

“Then we go tonight,” Will whispers.

Hannibal stands in one fluid motion and cradles Will’s face in his hands. He kisses him almost too fast, as if he’ll take it back if Hannibal so much as lets him breathe. But eventually, at Will’s soothing, at his touch, he does pull away.

“You are awake earlier than anticipated, so dinner is still some time away from being ready,” he says, collecting himself and stroking his thumbs over Will’s cheekbones. “You should return to your home and gather anything else you want to take with you. Leave your notes.”

“Jack has a preternatural sense for when I’m out and about,” Will says, hands suddenly harsh against Hannibal’s skin, digging into his sides. He shudders, flinches at something that

Hannibal doesn’t quite catch. “What if he comes to my door?”

Hannibal doesn’t try to gentle him, but instead says, “Then there will be no need to leave him a note.”

He studies Will for a moment—*everything, head to toe; the clothes chosen, the muted colors of the waistcoat, the practicality and functionality of Will Graham that nonetheless has its own grace*—and moves to the nightstand. He picks up Will’s spectacles and comes back to press them into the hand resting on Will’s knee.

“If Jack were to tell you all is forgiven, Will,” he asks, “would you accept his forgiveness?”

Will curls his fingers around the spectacles slowly, then stares down at them. Hannibal threads his fingers through Will’s hair, stroking slowly, as Will thinks. Sometimes, he wishes he could follow Will back into his own head—*feel the pull of the river, follow where the stream takes him.*

“It would depend,” Will says slowly, “on what the price for that forgiveness was.”

“I would forgive you,” Hannibal says. “If you took it. No matter the price.”

“You shouldn’t.” Will flinches and jams the glasses onto his face, a door slamming shut. He gets back up to his feet, likely too quickly. “I’ll be as quick as I can be. Don’t want to miss dinner.”

Hannibal catches Will’s arm before he can skirt around him and head for the door.

“Perhaps it’s not me who needs to embrace forgiveness, Will, but you. You judge yourself too harshly, always pitted against a concept of yourself that you carry in your mind. An ideal. And the concept of an ideal is always searching for an objective reality to match,” he says. “It won’t find one. That is not a personal failing, but a truth of being alive.”

Will doesn’t look like he believes him. He looks like he knows what that truth could cost him. And Hannibal feels as if he’s returned to that edge again, balanced just so—*and Will could so easily send him right over it.*

Hannibal curls fingers around Will’s wrist when he barely brushes his lips against Will’s and promises, “I’ll have everything prepared when you return.”

Will returns the kiss and promises, “I won’t be long.”

Hannibal almost doesn’t let him go.

Will's house is silent when he eases the front door open and lights the lamps. It smells cleaner than it has in months, aired out and scrubbed—Hannibal's doing, no doubt, because of course Will's home couldn't be allowed to remain an abattoir. Still, he can almost taste the tang of blood at the back of his throat as he makes his way to the kitchen. He stares at the spot where he murdered Abel Gideon.

The floor is clean. The late afternoon shadows refuse to coalesce into something sinister. Even as he makes himself think back to the dreamy memory of Gideon in Hannibal's cellar, gutted and cooled, the feeling of the knife in his grasp and a knee joint giving below his hands, he feels no regret. Some horror, though, distant and muffled, wrapped in gauze.

If he could have avoided it...

He would have. Of course he would have. But Hannibal forced his hand, and he can't hate him for it. If he closes his eyes and remembers the taste of tongue in his mouth, he feels a flare of warmth in his chest. *Safety*.

Conditioned. He knows it's conditioned. It doesn't matter. It slots in neatly with the rest of him, unnaturally introduced but no less true for it.

The kitchen has nothing in it for him to take, so he makes himself leave. Pulls himself back into his old life, and goes in search of what will accompany him to the new.

He wants to take more with him than he expected.

A few articles of clothing that Hannibal passed over, yes. Fishing supplies. Books. But then other, smaller things: a medal from the Hobbs case, which he hates and loves in equal measure. A scarf from Dr. Bloom. Bullets, spent and warped, from a day out shooting with Katz. A watch from Jack, unwound now, but still functional. A small painting his father always told him his mother had done, but that Will suspects was purchased. A blanket that he's had since he was a boy, that he doesn't use on the bed because he doesn't want to sweat through it and lose the last traces of his childhood dog.

Evidence not of a life *well* lived, perhaps, but lived, all the same.

Hannibal had given no instructions to pack light, and they aren't fleeing, not exactly, but Will hesitates before dragging out his small steamer trunk that Gideon hadn't fit into. It still feels like overkill. It's—not embarrassing, not quite, but it leaves him raw in a new way that he's shockingly unprepared for.

He's leaving. He's *leaving*.

He's leaving with a man he loves, for a new life somewhere else, where he will no longer be entangled in a dangerous morass of loyalties and fears. Where he will no longer be a danger to the few people he holds dear.

He—

A knock at the door stops him cold.

Jack, he thinks, but the knock comes again. For all its insistence, it's too reasonable to be Jack's. Will stares down at the half-packed trunk, set in his windowless study, then goes to the door.

It's Beverly Katz. Out of uniform, in trim trousers and a tailored jacket, almost masculine but for the puff of the sleeves. Off the clock.

Will freezes in the doorway.

Katz's eyes widen, brow drawing down. "Will, your *face*—Crawford said you'd been hurt, but I didn't think..."

He shakes his head, then winces as it makes his nose throb. "It's fine. I'm fine. Does, uh—does Crawford need me?"

"No, Will, I came to—" She grimaces. "Don't make me do this on your doorstep. Can I come in?"

No.

But Will nods anyway and steps back. His pulse is heavy. Almost painful. His chest is tight as Katz joins him in the hall. He makes no move to close the door, so she takes it from him and does it herself.

"You really look like you need to be in bed," she says, slowly.

Will looks away. "Dr. Lecter's monitoring it. It's fine. Just—just an altercation, with a suspect."

He expects her to ask *suspect for what?* because as far as he knows, Gideon's the only killer supposedly at large at the moment, but that's not what she asks. Instead, she sucks in a tight breath. "Yeah," she says. "Yeah, I'm sure he's monitoring it. Will, we need to talk about that. "

Will's head jerks around.

Katz meets his eyes without flinching, jaw set. She has—*that* look in her eye. The one that, in concert with her ability to roll with whatever is thrown her way, has always made him feel safe around her. The look that says *I know when to fight*.

"Let's sit down," she says.

That's the polite thing to do. Will doesn't move.

She sighs. "Fine. We'll do it your way. Look, we've been running down leads on that Ripper kill at the river," she says. "The victim used to work at Revelton Teaching Hospital. At the same time Dr. Lecter worked there."

"There aren't that many hospitals in the city," he replies, his stomach growing cold.

"Yeah, well. The nurse was fired for siphoning morphine supplies. She tried to lay the blame on Dr. Lecter. It didn't stick."

"And? Katz—*Beverly*, what are you trying to—"

"Surgical skills. Anatomical knowledge. Refined, implicitly trusted, and Crawford's mentioned he goes to the opera. Patron of the arts. Personal grudge, maybe. Definitely awareness of the victim. That's too many things that line up for my liking." She tries to catch

his gaze. He doesn't let her. "Look, I know he helped you out at the LeBeau scene. But I *also* know you don't let anybody close, and yet somehow, from what Crawford's said, you two are practically attached after, what, a couple of weeks? And you've been sick. You're really clearly still sick."

Will can see himself and Hannibal through her eyes. It isn't pretty. He flinches. He thinks about where the closest knife is. He regrets not taking her to the kitchen.

He hates himself for thinking that.

"I'm not saying he's the Ripper, Will," she says, voice softening. "I'm just saying you need to be careful around him."

Will bites down a hysterical laugh, but words spill out instead. "Oh, I don't think I have anything to fear from him."

"Why not?"

He doesn't want to lie to her, but Beverly won't buy *because he loves me*. He looks around, the walls drawing in, and tries to remember to breathe. His nose protests.

His nose.

"Didn't Jack tell you already? I killed Abel Gideon." He gestures to his face. "Left me with something to remember him by first. I can—I can hold my own, Bev."

Will expects some response. He doesn't expect silence. At last, he looks at her.

She's staring at him like she doesn't recognize him. "You *what* ?"

"Like Hobbs," he says. "It was self defense. Here, he came here. Didn't Jack—"

"No, Will. He didn't tell me anything." Her breathing picks up. She's trying to hide it and it isn't working. He feels sick. "As far as the unit is concerned, Gideon is still at large."

She looks at him, then the hall, then beyond him to the scrubbed kitchen. Maybe she smells the cleaning chemicals.

"Where's the body, Will?" she asks.

He tastes Gideon's flesh on his tongue. Hears the crack of the femoral head leaving its socket. Bile rises in his throat for the first time.

"*Where's the body*?"

Will doesn't have an answer. She sees it. He can't hide it.

Behind Beverly, shadows coalesce.

“No, no no no,” he whispers. Wants to shut his eyes. The stream, find the stream. This hasn’t happened since he accepted who he was—but no, that’s not true. When Jack visited—

His chest burns. Beverly twists where she stands.

She sees it. Or she sees *something*, because it isn’t fully formed yet. A shadow within shadows. Something peeling itself from the front door.

"What the *fuck* is that?" Beverly whispers.

It’s going to kill her. Fuck, *he’s* going to kill her. There’s no other way out of this. She came to save him and he, he, he—

"Stay back. Beverly, *please."* Will’s voice cracks, and he is torn between keeping his attention on the beast emerging from the shadows, its crown of antlers stretching to the ceiling, and trying to convince Beverly she's in danger.

She doesn’t need convincing. She’s out of uniform, but she has a pistol in her coat, and her jaw is set as she takes aim.

The lights in the hall go out.

Two shots crack the air, muzzle flashing white, and then Will has Beverly up against the wall. The urge to smother her, to snap her neck, is so strong, but he wrestles it down. She shouts, tries to fight him. He’s not strong, not right now, but he holds on tight.

And Will looks over his shoulder and thinks of death.

You remember what it is to be dead, the same as I do, he tells the shadow that approaches, heedless of the bullets that passed through it. *We live on borrowed grace.*

The shadow stops. Will sees it, and the corpse beneath.

The flesh withers. Contracts.

Disappears.

The lights come back on, and Beverly punches him in the gut.

Will falls to the ground, winded, shaking. Beverly stares down at him in horror. She does not lower her gun. He does not flinch. “What,” she says, voice rough, “just happened?”

Will doesn’t answer.

“I am trying very hard not to jump to conclusions here. Tell me this isn’t what it looks like. Give me another answer that isn’t—”

"Jack knows," he says, not looking at her. "He knows. We're taking care of it."

Silence. Red light from the setting sun slips through the two bullet holes in the front door.

"You had better not be lying to me, Will," she says at last. "You had better not be fucking lying."

"I'm not," he insists. "But you're not safe here, either. Go home."

"Is Jack going to find you here when I tell him to come looking?"

Will is silent. He doesn't not move.

"Be here," Beverly Katz says. "Be here or I will hunt you down myself."

Footsteps. Ragged breathing. The front door slams shut.

He gives himself five minutes to reassess. To think through his options. Jack is on his way. Hannibal is waiting. And if Jack finds him gone, he will know exactly where Will has fled.

Will gets up, takes the half-packed case, and goes out to hail a carriage back to Hannibal's. Inside his head, a clock begins to tick.

While Will is gone, Hannibal gets everything ready.

We go tonight.

It had been like so many other things that came out of Will Graham's mouth, simple and honest. But so, so easy.

Too easy, perhaps—*a possibility that haunts him, that feels like something dogging his steps too close in the dark.*

So Hannibal packs, taking what he needs and some things he simply wants—*every time he leaves a place, there's always a small chance he won't get to come back*—and sets his case and medical bag by the back door. Then he attends to the dining room, choosing items from his collection—*skulls and oddities, preserved fruits and strings of dried herbs*—to put together into a small centerpiece. He lights the tall bergamot-scented tapers in the middle, and sets two places.

The thoughts persist. The doubt. The Unnamed's warning slips to the front of his mind, gentle as a caress.

Don't trust Will Graham.

Hannibal has just pulled the ribs out to rest when there's a knock on the door. He peers through the eyehole to see Will with a small steamer trunk on his doorstep and immediates pulls the door open.

Will's smile is bashful, genuine, and he gestures to the trunk. "I tried to pack light. Not sure I succeeded"

Hannibal steps back to let him in. “I don’t expect you to be as ascetic, Will. Feel free to leave that beside the rest. No need to take it upstairs; I packed your clothes in with mine.”

“Is dinner ready?” Will asks, setting his case by the rest of the luggage. He removes his glasses and tucks them in his suit coat pocket. He hangs his hat up and Hannibal’s heart burns with delight at how natural that feels and a fraction of sorrow at how he won’t see it hanging on this particular hook again. “I’m starving.”

In his life, Hannibal has had many, many friends for dinner. Those had always been shows, performances, and while he enjoys performances, he has never had a meal felt like this—*already he’s fiercely protective of this new feeling, already prepared to guard it jealously.*

He isn’t particularly prone to ignoring things that nag at him, especially warnings. Intuition. He knows he can’t trust Will—*can’t trust the Unnamed, for all that it is often right*. But he simply wants this too much.

“Dinner is cooling at the moment and I was just about to fetch wine,” he says. “You’re free to wait in the dining room or to accompany me to the kitchen, whichever you’d prefer.”

Will ducks his head with a shy smile. “I think you can guess.”

And when Hannibal goes back to the kitchen, he follows easily. Hannibal retrieves the wine *—a special selection; he’s been keeping it for years, waiting for something that feels essential.* He comes back to find Will looking around the kitchen. Intently, as if absorbing or cataloguing. There’s something else at the corners of his expression. Something almost sad.

He sets the bottle down and follows Will’s look around. “The kitchen at my country house is beautiful, but in some respects I expect it will always pale in comparison. This house, this room, holds among its molecules the vibrations of all our conversations. Everything we've said.”

“Not all. My kitchen holds more than a few,” Will says with a little huff of laughter and another smile, this one sad at the corners. “And I’m sure we still have a lot to discuss, here or elsewhere.”

—they do; they will; but for now there is only his concern and the past they hold between them and this moment—

Hannibal decides he’s going to let himself have it anyway.

—that’s honest too; truth always has its consequences—

He uncorks the wine with a small laugh of his own. “I never meant to imply this would be the end of our conversations. Quite the opposite. The kitchen in there can be broken in similarly, should you desire it.”

Will’s cheeks flush but he pauses a moment in his sweep of the kitchen, then says, “Is the house in your name?”

“No.” Hannibal uncovers the charred radicchio salad and the delicate swirls of piped potatoes —*that question speaks to concern, about him, about the Ripper killings.* But when he looks up, Will looks utterly at ease. “Only one person has traced it back to me in all the years I’ve had it. There’s a small cottage on the property and the person who lives there watches over it for me. If anyone else had come around, I would know.”

“Good. After all, Crawford is going to look for you first.” Will peers over at the food Hannibal has uncovered. “Did you always expect something like this? A pursuit, at any rate.”

“Jack setting out to discover wherever I’ve absconded with you is not what I would consider a pursuit. If I ever expected to be discovered is a different question.” Hannibal gestures to the sides. “I believe everything is ready for the table, if you don’t mind assisting.”

“That you made sure your country home isn’t traceable to you implies at least a certain amount of caution.” Will retrieves the dishes without question, though the line of his mouth has hardened. “Obviously this isn’t what you expected, but…”

Hannibal lets the implied question hang. He ignores Will’s clear irritation long enough for the both of them to take the entirety of dinner into the dining room.

“I never planned on anyone tying me to any wrongdoing. Seeing *me* in my art. I expected Jack getting close, perhaps, even too close for comfort. That is what the country house is for, though even it has other uses,” he says finally and then rests a hand lightly on the back of Will’s chair. “I didn’t expect you, Will.”

I didn’t expect to get to keep you.

Will leans back into his seat to gaze up at Hannibal, to reach back and touch his hand.

“They know.”

Hannibal goes very still. He doesn’t shake Will’s touch off, doesn’t tighten his grip on the chair but he is suddenly flush with cold. Bitter and caustic, like the wind off a snowstorm except it scours him raw from the inside out, that creeps through him with every slow pulse of his heart.

Will’s hand is warm and alive against him.

The truth, then, and all its consequences.

“The most beautiful quality of a true friend is to understand and be understood with absolute clarity,” Hannibal says finally—*and he said, he said he would forgive Will, no matter the price; his forgiveness has a steep price indeed.* He slides his other hand, whisper-quick, to the knife at Will’s place setting. “That makes this, I think, the truest moment of our friendship.”

“Beverly Katz came by my house,” Will says. His gaze is fixed on Hannibal’s face, his throat is bared—*he wonders how long it will stay that way*. “She’s gone to fetch Jack.”

Hannibal takes the knife. He knows Will can hear the quiet noise of the tablecloth shifting but still, he doesn’t move. Hannibal had always known this would hurt—*he’s gone for so long*

avoiding pain and true discomfort that he doesn't expect the way it sears his throat. The point of the knife is a warning against the soft flesh of Will's stomach. He could give them something to match.

He leans down to nuzzle at Will's ear and breathes, "You wanted to make sure I stayed put."

Will inhales sharply, and the knife catches on the fabric of his shirt. His hand tightens on Hannibal's. "I came back. I came back, as quickly as I could."

The room is still, save for their breathing. The candlelight flickers, but no shadows gather at the doorway. Will's had more than enough time to conjure a double to intervene, but his Mark is quiet.

Still. There is more than one way for Will to ensure their destruction.

Without end. Perhaps that was too much to promise. Perhaps all Will could've ever guaranteed them was the same end.

Hannibal shifts his hand out from under Will's just enough to slide their fingers together, to dig his nails into the back of Will's hand. "You tried to make a place in the world for both me and your loyalty to Jack, but you could never be whole there. You'd let him take us both away, deny us knowing whose man you truly are." He presses the blade in just enough to pierce through the waistcoat and shirt, to nick skin.

Will's lips part in pain, and he turns his head to search Hannibal's face. He moves slowly, steadily. There is no triumph in his gaze, only hurt and sadness. "Hannibal," he says. His free hand finally drops to the knife. Curls, gently, around Hannibal's fist. "She told me not to leave. I left. I'm letting *you* take me away."

There was a time when it probably would've been all too much, the hurt welling up in him, the instinct to push the knife in and keep going until Will spilled over like all that hurt. But instead he remembers Will's fingers on his insides, the tremble of the scissor blades against his neck.

Hannibal's eyes slide shut.

Don't trust Will Graham.

But he already made his choice. Decided to trust him, over and over—*and all for what?*

—for this—

He wets his lower lip then says, very quietly, "I wouldn't leave without you."

The knife tip scrapes a little deeper and he smells the faintest hint of blood.

Will doesn't breathe. He tightens his grip on Hannibal's hand, on the knife handle. Slowly, he guides their hands back. The tip of the blade catches on his shirt as Will creates space.

As Hannibal lets him.

When the knife hits the tablecloth with a soft thud and Hannibal lets it go entirely, Will barely manages not to gasp in relief. He can't help his shaking, though, and the dizzying rush of having kept both of them alive.

It was a nearer thing than he'd been prepared for.

Will says, as gently as he can, "We can leave now. Do you want to leave now?"

Hannibal's eyes open. He doesn't untangle his fingers from Will's. "Is this about what I want, Will?"

A sliver of pain digs into his heart, that Hannibal so quickly assumes the worst, but he can't blame him. In the carriage, Will had wrestled with himself. What Hannibal suggested came very close to being true; it would have been so easy to simply stall, to leave the final outcome up to Jack's speed and their luck. But then Hannibal had opened the door to his home, and Will had known.

He'd chosen Hannibal. He'd chosen himself.

"It's about what we need. Beverly is sending Jack to my house. Not here," Will says. "We don't have long, but we have long enough for dinner." His gaze shifts, finally, to the table itself. " *This* dinner."

That desire nearly ended his life. He could have told Hannibal immediately, but Abel Gideon's flesh steams on the table, and he wanted—*wants*—to test his teeth against it, prove to himself that he can eat it sober as well as dreaming. It's possible that he's misjudged, that there's not enough time to eat, but…

Hannibal can decide. Only he knows how much he trusts Will. Only he knows how much he's prepared to risk.

Will's heart beats faster.

Slowly, Hannibal pulls away from him entirely and moves to the other side of the table. Takes his seat.

"This meal is an act of the divine." Hannibal sets his napkin in his lap. "And more importantly, it was a gift. We may not be able to take our time, but we won't let it go to waste."

Will inclines his head, gratitude eclipsing relief. Pleasure settles in its wake

"Never to waste," he agrees.

And when Hannibal serves him, he hesitates only as long as a quiet prayer, and then he takes the first bite.

The flesh gives under his teeth, and he closes his eyes, experiencing both the physical pleasures of its flavor and texture, and the more psychological, thorny elements. This is a man, being masticated into fuel, and that means everything and nothing simultaneously. If a man has been killed, why not eat of him? There is nobody to mourn Abel Gideon, but if there had been, what then?

Beverly, he thinks, would prefer not to be consumed. What is the worth of honoring that?

He turns it back and forth as he lifts one rib to his mouth, sucks that meat from the bone, savors the richness, the perfect crust, the exquisite skill that has given him this feast. He is a creature that longs for violence. And now that it has found him, the worst is past.

“My compliments,” he murmurs, “to the chef.”

Hannibal has watched Will eat on multiple occasions. They all pale in comparison to this.

He eats without hesitation, in perfect knowledge of whose bones he wears his teeth against, whose flesh passes his lips, whose hand their dinner died at. Will knows and Will is here. Will stayed with that knife at his belly knowing what could happen. Afraid, perhaps, but accepting.

The tide in Hannibal eases at that. Eases more the more Will eats.

He dips his head in thanks at Will’s compliment and takes his own perfect bite with knife and fork. “And mine to the butcher. It's more flavorful for animals to be calm prior to slaughter. While it’s clear there was stress, I don’t detect the acidity of fear. He tastes bracing. Hardly frightened.”

“It was an almost equal contest,” Will confirms, and closes his eyes. “I had the physical advantage, but was also at the mercy of a few poorly timed revelations. About you. About myself. He nearly won. Planned to kill me as you might have, thinking it would allow him to understand you.” He runs his tongue over his teeth. “I told him he didn’t want that. And then I bit his lips off.”

Hannibal pauses at Will’s comment, fork halfway to his mouth. Will doesn’t linger on it, instead savors another bite of his meal, but Hannibal takes his next one slowly. Chews, swallows.

“What did you do with them?”

“I don’t know,” Will says, after some thought. “I swapped bodies with a double at that point, so I suppose my mind’s version of you ate them.”

“All the better to hide the evidence,” Hannibal says, biting a particularly tender bit of meat off his fork.

“Or to savor the victory.” Will reaches for his wine then, takes a long sip. “The first time I got inside your head, in that first dream, I was trapped in a lake. Under the ice. I had to let myself

drown to save you. But when I did, I saved myself too. I wasn't the one drowning anymore." He pauses, wet his lips. "Dream logic is so simple. Honest, often. But out here you can't reduce me to a set of influences. I know the truth about you and you know the truth about me."

And Hannibal does. For all of the coaxing he has done to pull Will closer into his orbit, into his world and for all that anyone else has done to pull Will out of it, Will has still gotten here on his own.

"Both alone, without each other," he says. Those dreams are only fragments in Hannibal's memory, but he's always committed each one to memory. His pulse quickens as he gazes across the table at the man who came to him, again and again, dreaming and awake.

Will smiles. "But we don't have to be. Not anymore."

Hannibal lifts his glass, then, and leans in. "To us. Together."

Will's smile blooms into a grin, and he tips his glass against Hannibal's. "For as long as we can hold it."

Because of all of truth's consequences, this is the one that matters, the one he finally understands. It isn't about trusting that they won't sharpen their teeth on each other anymore. That was never the promise. The promise is that they will stay.

He looks at the knife at Will's right hand. He never wants to regret anything, not regarding Will Graham.

They both drink. And when they set their glasses down, Hannibal has the delightful, uncanny feeling that their smiles match.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! We'll be taking a small hiatus, but after the new year, get ready for our sequel fic, **your soul is my eternal bruise**:

Will is determined to free Hannibal and himself from the influence of the Unnamed. Francis Dolarhyde causes problems on purpose. Hannibal's past catches up with him. The Inquisitors close in.

As always, you can find us at @chaotic_plotter and @serindrana on twitter.

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